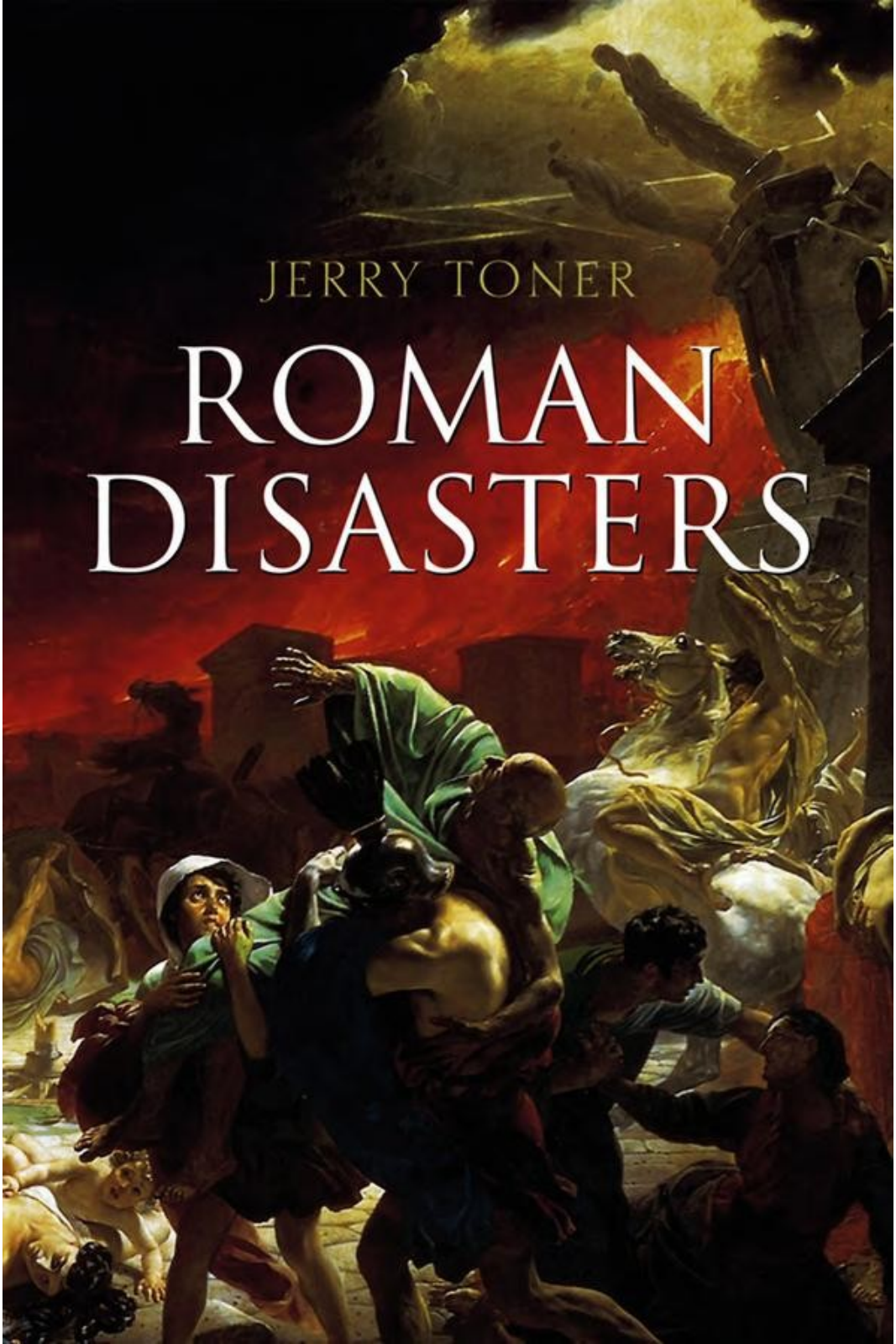




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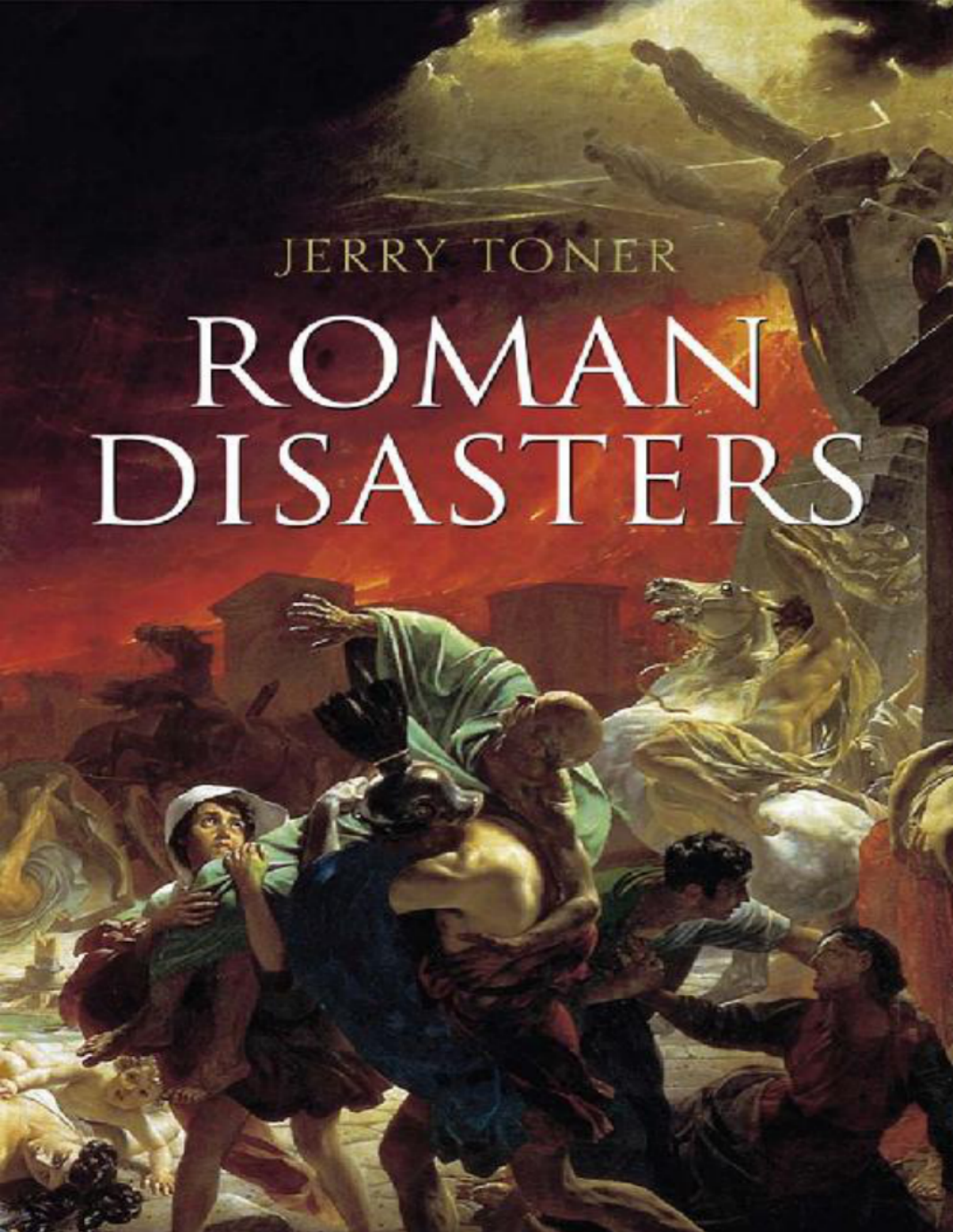
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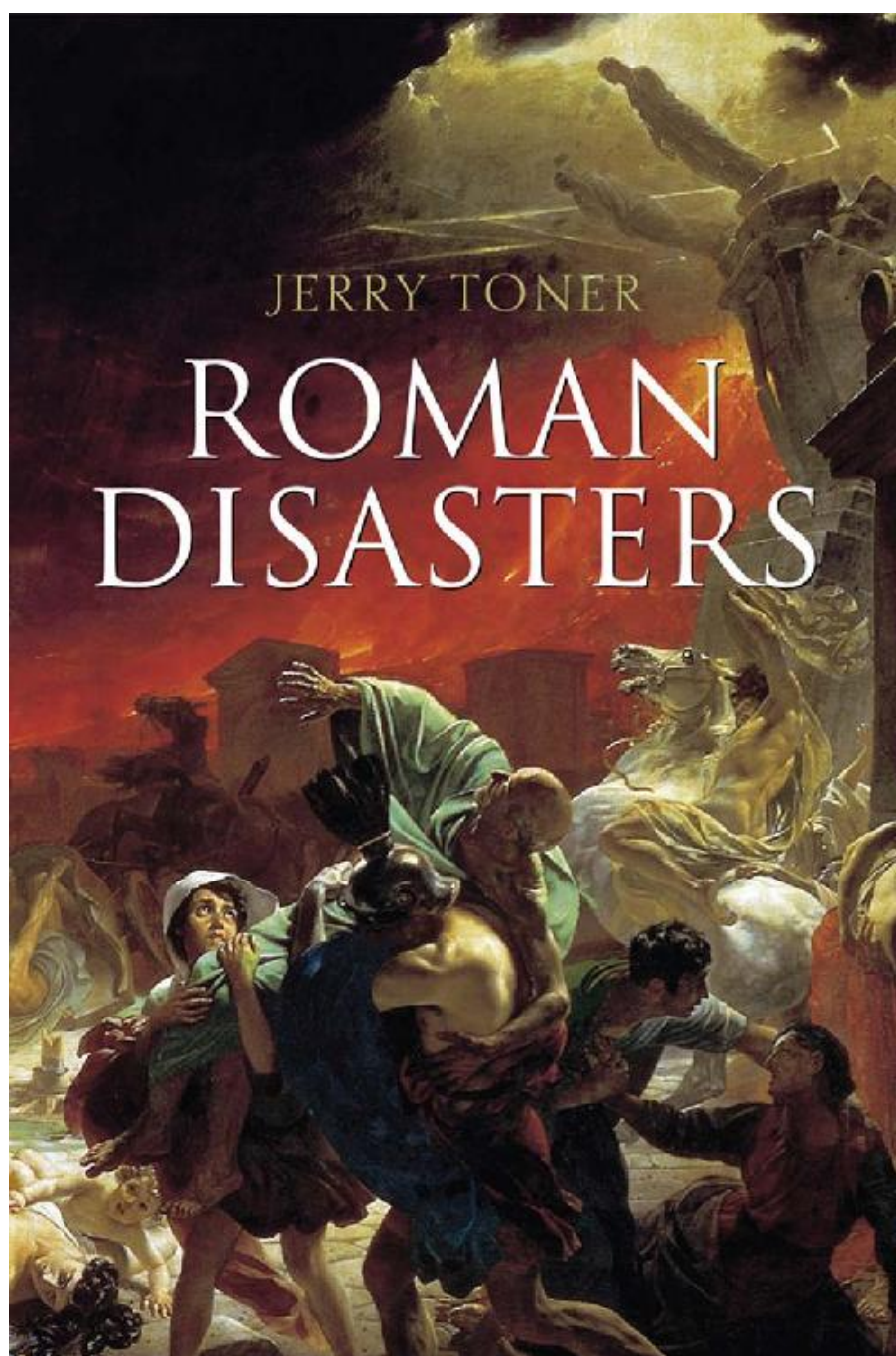
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ROMAN DISASTERS



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Roman Disasters

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Jerry Toner

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Acknowledgements

The aim of this book is to provide a broad and innovative treatment of the subject of disasters in ancient Rome. It tries to show the practicality and flexibility of the Roman political and cultural system in a way that is easily accessible to as wide a readership as possible, without sacrificing conceptual or empirical rigour. I came to the subject while researching into the non-elite in Roman society. It became clear that disasters, whether real, threatened or imagined, loomed large in the life of the average Roman. The effort involved in producing a book always means that many debts are incurred along the way. It is a pleasure to thank the following people, for all their support and encouragement: Pierre Caquet, Jason Goddard, Jon Gifford, William Harris, Peter Harvey, Chris Kelly, Bruce Kiddy, Justin Meggitt, Miranda Perry and Emma Widdis. My wife, Anne, contributed enormously to the project by acting as a sounding board for ideas and putting up with my many moods and absences while working on it. My son, Arthur, was born during the writing of this book and has taught me more than I would care to know about a whole range of issues. I am grateful to the President and Fellows of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, for their generous award of a Research Fellowship, and to the college's mature undergraduates for providing so much interesting and thought-provoking discussion. I also want to thank the staff of the Cambridge University Library and Classics Faculty who have always been exceptionally helpful. Andrea Drugan and Polity did their usual excellent job in producing the book. The anonymous readers for Polity provided many astute comments and helpful criticisms. Above all, I want to thank Peter Garnsey, who has been a teacher and a friend for many years, who made many improvements to the manuscript, and to whom this book is dedicated as a token of gratitude.

What is a Disaster?

Anthemius had fallen out with his neighbour Zeno. Whether it was the result of prying or some building work that had taken his light is unclear, but Anthemius wanted to get his own back. He thought about turning to the law. Always a risky business at the best of times, this route was made impassable by the fact that Zeno was a skilled lawyer and a friend of the emperor, no less. A down-to-earth engineer, as Anthemius was, could never hope to compete with his neighbour in the face-to-face verbal sparring that the Roman courts demanded, let alone run the risk of offending the emperor. So he decided to retaliate on his own terms. Zeno had a fine upper-floor room where he loved to pass the day and entertain his close friends, but the two houses were joined in such a way that the room below belonged to Anthemius. Filling some huge cauldrons with water and placing them at intervals, he fastened on tapering, trumpet-like pipes, which were encased in leather and sufficiently wide at their bottom ends to allow them to fit tightly over the rims of the cauldrons. He then fixed the upper ends of these pipes to the beams and joists of the ceiling, which obviously also served as the floor to Zeno's fine room. With this apparatus in place, he lit fires beneath these great cauldrons and as the water boiled, the steam it produced travelled up the pipes and exerted pressure on the woodwork. Little by little the pressure increased until it became so great that it shook the whole structure. Yet as an engineer, Anthemius had been careful not to overdo it, given that any collapse would have seen him lose his house too. Instead he calculated that the steam would exert just enough force to make the woodwork creak and wobble slightly. Moreover, Anthemius employed some other mechanical tricks to enhance the effect. He used concave reflective disks to produce lightning and struck percussive, resonant objects to imitate the sound of thunder. The impact on Zeno and his friends was dramatic. Fearing the onset of an earthquake, they ran outside, terrified. Zeno went straight to the palace to find out how the other notables had been affected by the tremors. They became indignant with him for his lack of taste: how dare he concoct such stories as some kind of practical joke? Embarrassed by his perceived faux pas, poor Zeno left the palace completely nonplussed about the 'earthquake' he had experienced.¹

Anthemius' trick shows us the degree of fear and panic that the experience of a disaster could generate within a Roman. This is hardly surprising given the unexpected nature and often devastating effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes. The onset of life-threatening events drives inhabitants of all societies into a state of confusion and alarm. But if we look a little deeper we can see that the story also reveals a number of characteristically Roman features. The first is that even for a wealthy orator like Zeno, building quality was of such a low level that even a modest wobble sent shivers of terror running down his spine. When we look at great Roman buildings, like the Colosseum or the Pont du Gard, it is easy to imagine that Roman building techniques were generally of a high standard. This is far from the case. Domestic architecture was, by modern western standards, often jerry-built: lacking adequate foundations and constructed of variable-quality materials.² These were buildings which were prone to collapse even in normal conditions let alone when placed under the enormous stresses of an earthquake. The degree of panic which a wealthy man like Zeno showed, therefore, was partly an inverse index of his faith in Roman architectural practice. The fact that his neighbour was an engineer and architect seems to have done nothing to raise his level of trust in the ability of the building which they shared to withstand the impact of an earthquake. That Anthemius understood the mechanics of steam power but harnessed it only for the purposes of playing a practical joke on his neighbour underlines how different were the concerns of Roman engineers. The fake disaster, therefore, can be said to have stress-tested Roman life, thereby revealing both the limits of the social system and the faith that its inhabitants had in it. When we look at genuine Roman disasters, I suggest, we will be able to learn much about the wider Roman world and the expectations of its inhabitants.

Anthemius' story also shows how disasters penetrated right to the top of Roman society. The wealthy could be just as vulnerable to events such as earthquakes and, what is more, the impact was something which Zeno assumed would be of interest to everyone in the palace. Indeed, the strong reaction of palace officials to what they saw as Zeno's poor judgement in spreading false rumours of disaster shows how seriously they took such events. Obviously this interest stemmed partly from the fact that earthquakes affected everyone. Zeno would have been keen to see if his friends and colleagues had survived, or indeed if his enemies and competitors had been obliterated. But the emperor's interest in the earthquake also reflected several other characteristically Roman concerns. Earthquakes destroyed buildings and if there was one thing which emperors were concerned about, it

was their architectural legacy. It mattered to them if their pet building projects had been knocked down. On the other hand, the laying waste of a city might have its positive side. Disasters could generate significant opportunities for vast rebuilding programmes. The 64 CE Great Fire in Rome provided the emperor Nero with a rare chance to redevelop swathes of central Rome, one which he took full advantage of by building his infamous Golden Palace. It was hardly surprising that many Romans wondered whether Nero himself had in fact started the fire, so great was the personal benefit he accrued from it.

The Chinese symbol for disaster is often said to be a combination of two different characters, one symbolizing danger, the other, opportunity.³ Few emperors tried to benefit from the opportunity presented by their subjects' misfortune in quite so blatant a way as Nero was alleged to have done. But most did try to exploit the shock of unforeseen calamities to express, increase and advertise their own power. Disasters, whether in the form of events such as fires, floods or earthquakes, gave emperors a tremendous opportunity to bring into operation that key Roman social force, patronage. Victims wanted help and support; structures and facilities had to be repaired; above all, social relationships needed to be re-established and reaffirmed. This is not to say that Roman emperors saw themselves as providing some general emergency service in the event of disaster striking. The reality was that emperors tended to be highly selective as to where, how and to whom they offered their assistance. This can naturally tell us a great deal about who and what mattered in Roman society, since the emperors were keen to help those who were most in a position to return the favour in some way.

Anthemius had a much better understanding of structural forces than did most ancients. Like him we can stand back and laugh at Zeno's reaction to his trembling living room. But we also live in a world where disasters are common. The *World Disasters Report* of 2001 calculated that 2,108,025,000 people had been affected by disasters globally during the last decade of the twentieth century.⁴ Of course, the relative unpredictability of many disasters means that the number of people affected varies considerably from one year to the next. The low year of the last decade, 1997, saw only 67 million touched by a disaster, compared with a high of 344 million in 1998. Not only does the modern world continue to be affected by disasters in the same way that the Roman empire was, but both the frequency and the impact, in terms of both human and financial cost, are increasing.⁵ The ranking of different types of natural disaster according to the number of deaths worldwide gives an indication of what types of event have historically been the biggest killers (table 1).

Table 1 Natural disaster type ranked by number of deaths, 1947–1980

Disaster type	Number of deaths
Hurricane	499,000
Earthquake	450,000
Flood (not associated with hurricane)	194,000
Thunderstorm/Tornado	29,000
Snowstorm	10,000
Volcanic eruption	9,000
Heatwave	7,000
Avalanche	5,000
Landslides	5,000
Tsunami	5,000

Source: Shah, B. V., ‘Is the environment becoming more hazardous? A global survey 1947–1980’, *Disasters*, 7 (1983), 202–9.

This indication has severe limitations, however, because the numbers are skewed by a small number of particularly significant events. A larger-scale study looked at the percentage contribution to total deaths for each hazard type for the twentieth century as a whole (table 2).⁶

Even then, though, the numbers are affected by the fact that certain types of disaster have news value and so the number of deaths from these events has tended to be over-reported. There has also been a regional bias in the interest taken by the west in certain disasters. Asia has been more prone over the last century to suffer disastrous events, but these have held less interest for the western media. By contrast, relatively small-scale calamities in Europe have attracted significant coverage. A moment’s reflection will also bring the realization that these numbers, even over a timescale as seemingly long as a hundred years, are highly variable. The figure for tsunami, for example, which appears low in both these studies partly as a result of under-reporting, partly because of the vagaries of chance, would leap if the period were to include the dreadful South Asian tsunami of 2004, which killed perhaps 250,000, and that in Japan in 2011, when almost 20,000 died.

Table 2 Hazard type by percentage of deaths, 1900–1999

Hazard type	Percentage of deaths
Famine/Drought	86.9
Flood	9.2
Earthquake/Tsunami	2.2
Storm	1.5

Volcanic eruption	0.1
Landslide	< 0.1
Other	Negligible

Source: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), ‘EM-DAT: The International Disaster Database’, www.emdat.be.

We will come back to the problems of methodology involved in studying disasters, but for now it will have become apparent that greater technical expertise and knowledge have not allowed humanity to stand aloof from the problems of disaster in the manner of Anthemius. All too often, modern societies are reduced, like Zeno, to fleeing in panic from the impact of some potentially catastrophic occurrence. Disasters, therefore, give us a means of comparing how different societies have reacted to and tried their best to cope with the extreme situations which they often generate. In some basic way, disasters also provide a ready means for us to empathize with Roman experiences, if only as a prelude to understanding how radically different were their own conceptions of these events.

The Roman empire was an extraordinarily successful military, political and cultural enterprise. Indeed, Rome has been famous throughout history for its great triumphs.⁷ Yet Rome also suffered frequent, regular and sometimes colossal disasters. From the battle of Cannae, where 50,000 men fell in a single day, to the Great Fire in Rome, to the first appearance of the bubonic plague in the sixth century, the Roman world experienced large-scale calamities.⁸ The aim of this book is to analyse from the top down how the Romans coped with, thought about and used these events. There has been much excellent scholarship on individual or localized disasters, such as famines or floods, but none that has looked at disasters as a conceptual unity.⁹ I think this is an oversight given the importance the Romans themselves attached to these events and how useful a source they can be for telling us about the Roman approach to societal danger and risk.

The ancients recognized that disasters could be both significant and interesting. The fifth-century BCE Greek historian Thucydides argued at the start of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* that whereas the greatest struggle of the past had been the Persian wars, in which a coalition of Greek states had repelled the two punitive expeditions of the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes in 490 and 480 BCE, it was the war between Sparta and Athens from 431 BCE that was the more important. The reason, he suggests, is that during this war, disasters befell Greece the like of which had never occurred in any equal space of time. Cities were left desolate, exiles flooded alien states, and never had there

been so much bloodshed, all of which man-made disaster was matched by natural phenomena of equally destructive force: earthquakes of great violence struck everywhere, eclipses of the sun and moon were seen, and the land was ridden with droughts and attacks of the plague.¹⁰ Similarly, disasters fascinated Roman historians. Harking back to his Greek forerunner and model, the second-century CE Roman writer Tacitus starts his *Histories* by justifying his chosen period of the early empire because this was a time that was ‘rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil strife, horrible even in peace’.¹¹ Later, during the crisis period of the third century when the empire came close to falling under the weight of barbarian invasions, the historian Herodian claimed that what made the period from Marcus Aurelius to the third century more significant than the earlier imperial period, from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, was not only the succession of reigns, the variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars, the disturbances among the provincial populations or the destruction of cities; it was also the fact that in the later period ‘there have never been such earthquakes and plagues or tyrants and emperors with such incredible careers’.¹² Significantly, disasters also formed part of the official annual record of the most important events to have occurred in republican Rome, the *Annales Maximi*, which were drawn up and publicly posted by the pontiffs.

What is clear from this is that the Roman fascination with disaster did not simply reflect a ghoulish interest in death and destruction. Instead, what these Roman sources and their audiences saw as particularly significant was the causal link between military and political disorder and both natural and man-made disasters. War and rebellion were the usual stuff of politics, and food shortage and disease the everyday nuisances that went hand in hand with life in a pre-industrial society like Rome. But when catastrophe struck it was clear that here was a period in which the usual ordering of the world was breaking down. We can see this perhaps most clearly in the fact that it was a sure sign of the infamous emperor Caligula’s perversion that ‘he even used openly to deplore the state of his times, because they had been marked by no public disasters, saying that the rule of Augustus had been made famous by the Varus massacre, and that of Tiberius by the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenae, while his own was threatened with oblivion because of its prosperity’. What Caligula in his madness occasionally wished for, therefore, was ‘the destruction of his armies, for famine, pestilence, fires, or a great earthquake’.¹³

Roman and modern ideas about what constituted a disaster did not in many ways differ radically. Looking at definitions of the Latin words for disaster we find the following four main terms:¹⁴ *clades*, embracing

exile, military defeat, slaughter, the devastation of war and physical ruin; *calamitas*, for crop failure, blight, disease or military disaster; *casus*, for military or political disaster and violent death; and *pestis*, which is applied to physical destruction, plague, pestilence or the overthrow of a people or institution. All of these could be termed disastrous events in modern terminology. The obvious difference, however, is the heavy emphasis in Roman terminology on human, man-made disasters. It is military and political issues that feature most highly. This is partly a simple reflection of the fact that most of our literary sources, where we find such terms, use them in the context of their own preference for military and political history. But these terms also reflect the fact that it was often these kinds of events which had the most calamitous impact on the broad population of the ancient world. War, conquest, famine and death from these afflictions could lay low an entire population: it is no wonder that it was the bringers of these four fates that constituted the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the Bible's book of Revelation.¹⁵

Most disasters in the ancient world were not novelties but periodic regularities. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE gives us a misleading impression of the kinds of hazard that most people faced in their daily lives. Food shortages, for example, were a predictable feature of the Roman system of food supply. The sources suggest that a subsistence crisis occurred somewhere every 3.3 years.¹⁶ Such crises rarely developed into full-scale famines. And when they did, the fact that a famine was happening somewhere in the empire certainly does not mean that it was affecting the whole of the empire. Disasters, whether they were invasions, famines, floods, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, tended to have a fairly localized impact. In fact, micro-disasters are a recurrent feature of ancient sources. The account of the life of the seventh-century holy man Theodore of Sykeon, in Galatia in what is now Turkey, for example, is full of the village-sized panics and crises which probably for most people constituted their experience of disaster. We find villages afflicted by plagues of beetles, beasts, worms and dormice. At one point, we find the men of the village of Euarzia burning unslaked lime for the building of the church, which they then load onto wagons. As they make their way to the monastery, a dark cloud overshadows them and rain begins to fall. Knowing that lime and water do not mix, the account describes how 'the farmers were terrified and desperate, thinking that their wagons and oxen would be burnt by the lime because of the downpour of rain'.¹⁷ This is hardly comparable with the destruction of Pompeii, with all its drama and significant loss of life, but for the poor peasants in this rural hamlet, the loss of their transport and cattle would have threatened their very

livelihoods. And however short term the effects of such an accident might be – in time, the villagers would have recovered sufficiently to afford more wagons and oxen – in that short term tremendous hardship was likely to have arisen.

Fortunately for the men of Euarzia, the holy man intervened to make the cloud shed its rain on either side of their carts. But most people could not count on such miraculous intervention. Instead they had to cope with the endlessly recurrent local crises of the Mediterranean environment. These did not only take the form of near-miss accidents. Floods were commonplace in the Mediterranean region, a ‘perennial hazard’ ranging from the annual inundation of the Nile in Egypt to flash floods resulting from heavy rainfall.¹⁸ Even in the great city of Rome, floods of the Tiber were both frequent and severe.¹⁹ Natural disasters were less predictable, although earthquakes were a regular feature of life in the eastern half of the Roman empire. Perhaps one of the few benefits of this pre-industrial existence was that the inhabitants of the Roman empire did not have to cope with environmental change on a global scale as we do today. Romans did, however, have to cope with other less regular or local disasters. Wars and revolts generally had a more widespread geo-graphical impact and, particularly in the case of sieges, could affect almost all of the city’s population. Wars were a recurrent feature of ancient life, although their incidence tended to coincide with periods of uncertainty, such as the end of the republic, or particular external threats, such as invasion by the Carthaginians.

Catastrophic events like the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE were far rarer. It is curious and interesting that Seneca’s earlier work on natural phenomena, the *Quaestiones naturales*, leaves out volcanoes. But like that of most earthquakes, the effect of Vesuvius was not widespread or, apart from on the nearby towns themselves, long term. The effect of the eruption of Vesuvius may have been to destroy the buildings and some of the population of the nearby towns, but it does not seem to have had much lasting impact on the region’s productivity or on its contribution to Roman commerce.²⁰ Indeed, the effect on the wider Roman world seems to have been negligible, a claim that is supported by the lack of interest which contemporary writers showed in the events. The fact that even significant events seem to have remained local in their impact tells us something of the resilience of the Roman system to sudden shocks. What the relative indifference of Romans at the time to the fate of Pompeii and its residents may actually show is that this resilience at least in part stemmed from the very normality of disasters in the Roman world. Whether it was the inability to produce enough food from the land because of drought or

swarms of locusts, or the destruction of buildings by flooding, or the loss of family members from the ravages of plague, people were accustomed to experiencing such sudden setbacks, which reduced their shock-value. Risk was, in effect, routinized. For the most part, therefore, a stable symbiosis existed between communities and their environment, which had a substantial degree of elasticity built into the system. The attitude of most towards disasters of all kinds was largely one of acceptance.²¹



View of Vesuvius erupting at night in 1944.
Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

It is time to discuss what the term 'disaster' means. Disaster has been the subject of academic study since 1920 when Samuel Prince carried out research into the aftermath of a huge munitions ship explosion in Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the First World War, which devastated

the town and killed almost 2,000 people.²² But almost a century of research has failed to generate any agreed definition of exactly what constitutes a disaster. It is clearly a slippery concept to grasp, but it is possible to isolate some of the main themes and issues that a study of disasters will have to address. Disaster represents more than the usual array of risks and hazards that societies always face. These hazards can be grouped into three different areas:

- *natural hazards*:
- atmospheric: rain, snow, hurricane
- hydrological: floods, drought
- geological: earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides
- biological: epidemic diseases, blight, plagues of insects, forest fires
- *technological hazards*:
- fire, hazardous materials, destructive processes, structural failure, mechanical devices, organizational failure
- *violence*:
- war, rebellion, assault, ethnic cleansing

Each of these hazards is capable of generating a disaster-type event. This can then be described as either natural or man-made, depending on the underlying cause. This is not always easy to ascertain, particularly where a complex series of events has led up to its occurrence. A famine, for example, might on the face of it be the result of a drought, but might also be partly or largely a consequence of organizational failures of food supply. Man-made hazards can be further divided into those which can be considered to be accidental, those which have arisen as the result of deliberate policy, and those which are the result of a combination of the two.

How can we decide what kind of hazard-related event constitutes a disaster? Are wars and revolts comparable with volcanic eruptions, famines and plagues?²³ Do disasters have to be social in their impact? Or, put another way, do disasters need deaths to count as such? And if so how many? Is a single death or are a few serious injuries sufficient? There have been three main theoretical approaches to answering these questions, all of which are helpful. The first has been to see disaster as

an external agent. Studies adopting this view have focused on how people react to specific external events which have imposed themselves on their lives. Earthquakes, floods and wars are, in this view, all comparable because they act as the triggers which precipitate human crises. It is important to realize that this approach sees the triggering event, such as an earthquake, as an agent and not the cause. An earthquake does not always produce a disaster, only if there are people living close to its epicentre. Even then, the impact of the earthquake will depend on social factors such as the quality of building construction, the degree to which building regulations are enforced, how people react, and what kind of relief mechanisms are in place.

This agent-specific view is the most common way of looking at disasters. It carries with it the risk that it reduces disasters to a fixed list of events. It also tends to emphasize both individual tragedy and individual acts of heroism as a way of humanizing the large-scale event. This is certainly the kind of reporting that is most commonly found in the modern media. More penetrating analysis can be carried out on the second approach, which views disasters as an expression of social vulnerabilities, that is to say the result of underlying community weaknesses. Disasters in this view occur when social structures and relations are unable to cope with the impact of some kind of abnormal event or situation. Another way of putting this is that it is easier to say that the famine was caused by a drought than that the risks inherent in the supply system were revealed during a water shortage. In this view, the disorder of disaster is produced from within and is a consequence of society's own imperfect ordering. It also results from society's inability to cope with the changes to social and political boundaries that occur during situations which are extreme by the standards that have prevailed previously.

If there is a problem with this kind of approach, it is that it looks at disaster to try to explain social behaviour in a general sense. Often funded by governments to improve their ability to respond to disasters, research taking this approach has a tendency to formulate hard-and-fast rules about how people can be expected to react and behave when confronted by an extreme set of circumstances. The fact that most of this research has focused on the modern developed world has also encouraged a lack of historic perspective. A third, more subtle and historically sensitive approach is to try and understand how different cultures have reacted to disastrous situations. A disaster then comes to be seen as any event which generates a communal crisis. This crisis is reflected in a crisis of communication between different social groups, an upsetting of the system of meaning and a loss of the

cornerstones of common sense. Disasters are then no longer seen as a fixed list. Above all, the danger which causes such a crisis need not be real. It can be religious, for example, as we shall see was often the case in the Roman world. Many self-reported disasters in the ancient world reflect this significant conceptual difference between what the modern world and the Romans thought caused a crisis in the social order. Religious and moral ideas were often central to their thinking. Of course, the problem with this approach is that it becomes possible to see almost any significant negative event as a disaster.

Is a definition of disaster then possible? As one commentator has said, disaster is 'a vague term that has defied simple interpretation'.²⁴ Some have taken a straightforwardly practical approach. German insurance companies used to follow the simple policy of treating a disaster as an event which caused DM1 million's worth of damage or one thousand deaths.²⁵ The influential Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters adopts a definition which says that an event must result in 10 people dead or 100 reported affected to qualify as a disaster.²⁶ Clearly the benefit of this approach is simplicity, but it has the difficulty that any number will always be arbitrary and ignore the specific context in which the disaster has occurred. If nine people die in a village with a population of fifty, is this in any way less of a disaster than if ten die in a nearby town of five thousand? Some have tried to produce a more socially sensitive definition: 'disasters occur when one or more of the sociocultural systems that a population depends on fail to provide an adaptation to the environmental conditions which surround it, or when one of these systems produces, from within its own technological order, an event that threatens the population'.²⁷ Or that of Stock and Stott: a disaster is 'an occurrence of severe damage to life and/or property – resulting from natural causes, human error or deliberate intent – after which a community finds itself in shock, individual and communal coping mechanisms fail, and the survivors cannot alleviate their needs and suffering without outside assistance'.²⁸ What both these more nuanced attempts highlight is that disasters should not only be measured in terms of lives lost or property destroyed, but by the extent to which they reflect a failure of the cultural system. Most disasters can be explained in terms of their relationship with the normal order of things. As Hewitt says, disasters are problems that are 'out of control' and destroy order. They are events that happen 'out of place' and violate the proper social hierarchy.²⁹

The problem of definition underlines how complex and multifaceted disasters are. Disasters have various aspects – social, cultural, environmental, political, economic – which vary considerably from

one event to another. Disasters are generally a world where 'un-ness' rules: the unexpected, the unmanageable and the uncertain take over.³⁰ People are caught unawares and left unable to cope. But the characteristics of disasters are not unequivocally negative. A disaster is not just a crisis with a bad ending. A crisis represents a critical turning point and as such a disaster can create opportunities for social and cultural change. The fact that what constitutes a disaster varies from culture to culture, and even within a culture, makes it impossible to create an all-embracing definition. A disaster, therefore, comes to be seen as a time and a space where a threat has produced uncertainty in a culture's normal framework for understanding reality. Any event, whether it be geological, military, biological, religious or financial, is capable of generating that level of uncertainty and sense of crisis. It is important to note that the fact that what constitutes a disaster cannot be fixed means that its definition is always a matter for dispute. People within a society do not always agree on what represents a real crisis, argue vociferously about what needs to be done, and act very differently to help alleviate the situation. Often, the definition reflects the needs of the definers, who tend to be those who hold power in either the political or the religious system.

What is clear is that the use of the label 'disaster' shifts the emphasis away from the physical agent towards the social features of an event. The crucial ingredient is the victims. A disaster needs people and reflects the effects that a particular trigger event has on them, effects which will differ considerably from culture to culture. Even modern environmental disasters reflect the devastating impact on the natural world of human activity. A disaster, therefore, should be seen as a social construction. The effects that a trigger event produces reflect the varying levels of cultural protections which exist in an affected society. The distinction between natural and man-made disasters is misleading in this respect because it suggests that there is no human influence on the outcome of a physical event. In fact, the effect that a natural agent such as an earthquake has on a society is purely a reflection of the particular ways in which that society has chosen to inhabit its environment. It is the effects, not the cause, that constitute the disaster. The natural event itself should be seen as nothing more than precipitating a set of reactions.

Disasters are also probably best seen as systemic events which are powerful enough to be capable of acting as catalysts for social or cultural change. Disasters, therefore, are not small events that impact on the individual but represent a radically altered context in which the community suddenly finds itself. Disasters upset group routines, affect many if not all areas of people's lives, and demand a focused

communal response. Such exceptional circumstances force changes in normal behaviour or make people adopt different, disaster-related norms. Although communal, disasters can affect communities on a local, regional or wider level. But whatever the size of the disaster, it is characteristic that it will overwhelm the affected community's ability to cope and respond immediately, leading to significant social dysfunction. Not all disasters are shocks; many, such as food crises and earthquakes, repeat themselves so regularly that people adapt to them and grow resigned to their taking place. As socially significant events, disasters can have profound long-term effects and act as a powerful agent for cultural change. They can also accelerate pre-existing social processes of development. But societies can be highly resilient and resistant to change. We should not assume that the tumultuous events we shall find afflicting the Roman world generated any comparable cultural transformation.³¹

Every disaster generates its own special kind of suffering. This is because each society has its own unique structure which leaves it vulnerable in different ways to disaster events. Vulnerability is a key term in disaster research. It reflects people's capacity to avoid, cope with and recover from a disaster, because not all of society is equally affected by a disaster. As Hewitt says, 'The origins of disaster and the patterns of impact invariably reach back into the general contexts of material life, its environmental relations and geographical setting.'³² This is made painfully clear if we look at the dispersion of deaths in modern disasters. In natural disasters, it has been estimated that 95 per cent of deaths occur among the poorest two-thirds of the world's population.³³ CRED found in its study of 2,557 natural disasters from the period 1991–2000 that only 2 per cent of deaths came from the developed world. It is with good reason that Africa has become almost a byword for disaster itself. Not only are fatalities concentrated among the world's poor, but less developed countries have a far higher rate of deaths per event than rich countries. Relating the level of development to the impact of a disaster shows that those countries ranked with a high level of development suffered 23 deaths per event, compared with 1,052 for a country with a low level of development. By contrast, the financial impact of the disaster was reversed, with a less developed country's disaster costing an average of just US\$79m versus US\$636m in the developed world.

Natural disasters do not have this disproportionate impact because the environment has become more dangerous. Put simply, it is because in the modern world population pressure and land hunger have forced people to inhabit more hazardous areas and expose themselves to more vulnerable situations. The effects of a disaster, therefore, are

distributed largely in accordance with the societal conditions on which it impacts. Whether, where, how and especially to whom disasters happen depends mostly on established social conditions. This emphasizes how inadequate is the popular view of disasters as events which occur by chance and are as a consequence unavoidable. The word 'disaster' itself, meaning 'ill-starred', reflects this kind of outlook. In fact, the distribution of human casualties is often closely related to socioeconomic status. Material losses are also generally disproportionately distributed according to such variables as age, gender, occupation, political status and wealth, to list but a few. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *World Vulnerability Report* found over 200 indicators of disaster risk vulnerability. Amartya Sen, for example, found that famine was not usually the result of a shortage of food in the system but the result of what he termed a lack of entitlement among the poorest to the food which did exist. In other words, the poor were not thought by the authorities to merit a share of what food stocks were available. This underlines the fact that a disaster should not be seen simply as a sudden, dramatic event. Often a disaster is a slow-onset occurrence, which is a function of the existing social order. It is possible, therefore, and can make more sense, to speak of the 500-year earthquake.³⁴

Disasters reflect a complex relationship between a human population and its environment. In the Roman world, we shall see that vulnerability to disasters was affected by politics, social status, ideology and economics. The numerous disasters that afflicted Roman society can therefore reveal much about its structure. I try to move beyond the doom-and-gloom image of people cowering passively in the face of disaster. Disasters did not result solely in outbursts of jungle-like selfishness; rather they often triggered the display of strikingly altruistic and creative behaviour. Disasters in Rome were also as much about regeneration and recovery as about fatalities and collapse. There is more to disasters than death and destruction, since the fact is that most people survive disasters. Even in the catastrophic volcanic eruption which destroyed the town of Pompeii and some of its neighbours, it is unlikely that more than 2,000 died out of a population close to 20,000.³⁵

Disasters show how survivors created their social reality. The ways in which people responded to disaster reveal how society valued its members differently and how it dealt with threats to its existing structure. We shall find in the Roman world that disasters often proved to be opportunities to reaffirm pre-existing social bonds. But by challenging existing norms, disasters also provided opportunities for change and for particular groups to gain advantage over others,

which generated conflict. For many, life in the Roman world was one of permanent vulnerability. Communal grief arrangements tell us how Romans coped with the emotional demands that such vulnerability placed on them. Religious responses show how they tried to make sense of the seemingly unending flow of threats they faced. The depiction of the infliction of disaster upon others emphasized how central catastrophic events played in Roman culture. Triumph and disaster went side by side. The stories Romans told about disasters showed how fear could be used for ideological ends. They can also tell us something of the effect that disasters could have on the Roman mind. And if stories of disaster were central to the Roman understanding of their world, they have also become important to our understanding of the Roman world, whether it is the eruption of Vesuvius or their most significant military defeats. Finally, seeing how the Romans managed to cope with their disasters in comparison with some other pre-industrial societies can also give us a yardstick with which to measure their performance. This book will try to bring all these themes together and show how useful disasters can be as a tool for analysing the Roman world and our understanding of it.

Rome's Disasters

Rome's transition from a small city state, occupying a few square miles of the land around the banks of the river Tiber, to the master of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, which comprised perhaps 25 per cent of the world's population of the time, might seem to be very far from disastrous. But the growth of Rome's power did not take place in a straight line. And once established, Roman rule still suffered frequent challenges and setbacks. This book is organized thematically to show how the Romans reacted to, thought about and used these disastrous events in their history. This approach has the benefit of allowing us to analyse the Roman cultural response to catastrophe more deeply, by grouping together their various responses to similar crises at different periods. But it runs the risk of seeing the Romans as essentially unchanged over the centuries. The reality was that Rome changed considerably as it developed from republic to empire to Christian late antiquity. The thematic method also runs the danger of making it hard for the non-specialist to understand when Rome's greatest disasters occurred. The aim of this brief chapter is simply to describe some of the most significant of the calamities to afflict Rome in chronological order, providing an outline of the type of disasters that the Romans suffered, their scale and their consequences. These are events that we will encounter frequently in later chapters as we seek to understand in more analytical terms how the Romans reacted to such severe circumstances, and it will serve to establish a timeline for the purposes of orientation.

Rome's expansion during the fourth and third centuries BCE had brought it into conflict with the then dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean, Carthage. The first long war between them, fought from 264 to 241 BCE, resulted in Roman victory and acquisition of Sicily. But the Carthaginian threat had not gone away. Renewed hostilities in the Second Punic War saw the famous Carthaginian general Hannibal crossing the Alps into Italy, armed with that tank of the ancient world, the elephant. There was, however, little reason for the Romans to fear the worst. Hannibal was a relatively inexperienced young general and his forces were considerably smaller than those the Romans could muster. But the military creativity of Hannibal was to inflict two disastrous defeats on the home side. In 217, near Lake

Trasimene, in central Italy, he laid a carefully planned ambush for the larger Roman force sent against him. Concealing his cavalry and some of his infantry in a wooded valley to the north of the lake, he faked his own camp by lighting fires some distance away. Thinking that the Carthaginian forces were much further away than they actually were, the Romans moved quickly along the narrow defile that sat alongside the shore of the lake. As they passed out from this onto the broader plains, Hannibal launched his surprise attack. Suddenly the Roman forces, disorganized from the speedy march through the narrow pass, found themselves attacked on three sides. Unable to benefit from their usual close-ordered battle formation, the Romans were hacked to pieces or driven into the waters, where many drowned. Of the approximately 30,000 Romans who had set out, perhaps half died.

But a far worse military disaster was to come. The next year saw Hannibal pull off one of the greatest tactical victories in military history. After the trickery of Trasimene, this time the Romans were taking no chances. They raised a fresh army, this time of about 85,000 men, and pursued Hannibal down into the heel of Italy. When the armies met near Cannae, the Romans packed their forces deep to ensure victory. Hannibal manoeuvred his troops so that the Romans would face into the sun and also into the strong winds that would blow the dust up into their faces as they fought. Placing his best men and cavalry out on the wings, his centre slowly retreated under the pressure of the massed Roman ranks. But as they gave way, Hannibal's crack forces steadily encircled the Roman army. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late. Unable to escape from the Carthaginian vice, the Roman army was slaughtered. So great was the defeat that the Romans were unable to field another force to confront Hannibal. A number of Italian allies defected from Rome and went over to the Carthaginian side. The date of the defeat, 2 August, was to remain a day of ill omen throughout Rome's history, a date, like 9/11, which would always feel inauspicious for carrying out significant events, such as getting married or starting business ventures.

Despite these crushing military victories, Hannibal was never able to deliver a knock-out blow to the city of Rome itself. Eventually, Rome regrouped and went on to defeat and subsequently completely destroy the rival city of Carthage, which had caused it so much strife. Victories in the east saw Rome become the dominant power in the whole of the Mediterranean. Julius Caesar pushed the empire northwards, inflicting crushing defeats on the Gauls. By the time of the first emperor, Augustus, who reigned from 31 BCE to 14 CE, Roman territory stretched from the Rhine to the Euphrates, from Spain to

Egypt. Yet even in what might have appeared this invincible position, Rome still suffered a disastrous military setback. In 9 CE, the general Varus was ambushed with three entire legions in the thick, swampy forests of the Teutoburg forest in what is now southern Germany. The loss of so great a force left the emperor overcome, and after the news of the defeat was given to him, he refused to cut his hair or beard for months as if in mourning, and sometimes he would dash his head against a door, crying 'Varus, give me back my Legions.'¹

The growth of Roman power had brought with it a tremendous expansion of the city of Rome itself. By the time of Augustus the population had swelled to about one million, huge by the standards of a pre-industrial city. Think of imperial Rome and it is the great stone buildings such as the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the bath houses and the Circus Maximus that spring to mind. But the ancient city also consisted of stinking, twisting alleys, crammed full of poorly built wooden structures. These were a persistent fire hazard throughout Rome's history, and the city suffered a number of significant conflagrations. The most significant and well-known of these was the Great Fire of 64 CE, which happened when Nero was on the throne. The historian Tacitus describes the scale of this disaster. The city burned for six days and of Rome's fourteen districts only four escaped unscathed, with three being completely destroyed and another seven suffering damage so severe that only a few burnt-out shells of houses remained.² Infamously, Nero is said to have played his lyre and sung of the sack of Troy as the fire raged, though Tacitus dismisses this as mere rumour. In fact, in Tacitus' account we see a concerned emperor rushing back to Rome from Antium to arrange disaster relief by opening up his palaces to provide food and shelter for those made homeless, all of which he paid for himself. Despite this, stories circulated that the emperor had deliberately had the fire started so as to clear a central site for the construction of his fine new palace. Nero responded by scapegoating the Christians, a strange and seemingly unpopular sect. Later, he introduced new building regulations, stipulating the use of brick for housing, which was also to be more spaced out alongside wider roads. Despite this attempt at reform, fire remained a significant threat to the city and there were more major fires as soon as 69 and 80 CE.



Peter Ustinov as Nero in *Quo Vadis* (1951) playing his lyre as Rome burns. Although this is how we like to see Nero, the Roman historian Tacitus says he carried out significant disaster relief for the fire's victims..

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The problems of poorly built structures could also be seen in disasters that hit smaller urban centres. The town of Fidenae, about five miles north of Rome, possessed a cheaply constructed wooden amphitheatre, which had been erected by a local businessman called Atilius to host a gladiatorial show in 27 CE. Out to make a fast buck, he had failed both to lay the foundations in solid ground and to secure the fastenings of the wooden structure above. The show was a sell-out, with interest inflamed by the emperor Tiberius' recent ban on gladiatorial shows, and over 50,000 crowded in to the flimsy structure. Unable to cope with the weight of so many, it collapsed, leaving perhaps as many as 20,000 dead. As a result, the senate decreed that in the future only those eligible for the wealthy equestrian class should be allowed to put on games, since their high status should make them less susceptible to vulgar greed, and that all amphitheatres should have solid foundations. Atilius himself escaped with being exiled.³

The first two centuries CE are generally regarded as the period when the Roman empire was at its peak. At its heart was the period which Gibbon thought was when 'the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous'. Yet such good fortune did not see any decline in the number of significant disasters which afflicted the Roman world. Shortly before the Great Fire in Rome, in 62 CE, the town of Pompeii to the south had suffered a severe earthquake. Tremors had been commonplace in the area but this was far greater in its magnitude. The quake caused fires, by knocking over the oil lamps that the Romans commonly used for lighting, and significant structural damage to temples, bridges and houses. Many of these buildings had not been repaired by the time another, far larger, natural disaster was to affect this ill-fated town.

Situated close to the foot of Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii probably had a population of about 20,000 in 79 CE. The volcanically enriched soil provided a fertile bed for crops and the town prospered. The volcano had given warnings of its imminent eruption in the form of multiple earth tremors, but the Romans had not known to interpret them in this fashion. A heavy fall of ash and pumice stone rained down on the citizens, before a hot surge of gases blasted and burned them to death. It is not known how many died in the eruption, since many may have evacuated the town fearing another earthquake because of the tremors. Some twenty-five years later, the historian Tacitus asked his friend Pliny, who had witnessed the eruption from the other side of the Bay of Naples, to describe what had happened. His response, which we will examine later, is one of the few first-hand accounts we have of a Roman disaster from this period.

Rome also suffered an ongoing range of more subtle disasters of an ecological type that nevertheless caused them considerable local difficulties. Roman intervention in the landscape led to gradual changes which eventually could result in significant ecological damage. Deforestation occurred as a consequence of the clearing activities of Roman settlers in places such as the Germanic provinces.⁴ There was also heavy demand for wood as fuel, for use in ship-building and construction, and in mines for the smelting of metal ores. During the empire, the deforestation of the Apennine slopes increased because of the enormous charcoal demand of the imperial baths, despite the fact that firewood was being imported from North Africa.⁵ The early fourth-century emperor Galerius was said to have significantly increased agricultural land in Pannonia by cutting down 'immense forests' and draining what was virtually a lake into the Danube.⁶ The island of Elba, which had rich deposits of iron ore, had its wood supply exhausted, making it necessary to transport the ore to the mainland for smelting. Roman gold-mining practices included re-routing rivers to wash away the soil and making mountains collapse artificially to expose the ore.⁷ The air was contaminated by the poisonous gases given off by smelting silver and lead. In the animal world, the wholesale capture of wild beasts for the popular hunting shows of the empire's amphitheatres had significant and even disastrous effects on the fauna of some regions. Some of the great imperial animal hunts slaughtered hundreds of exotic wild animals, such as lions and leopards, with many also probably dying on the arduous journey to the amphitheatre itself. Elephants, rhinoceroses and zebras had become largely extinct in North Africa by the fourth century, while the poor hippopotamuses of Egypt were by then to be found mainly in the deep south of the country.⁸

There is no evidence of alarm at the depletion of such natural resources, nor were any attempts made to redress the balance. Indeed, clearing provinces of dangerous animals was seen as evidence of the benefits that Roman civilization could bring.⁹ The Christian writer Tertullian rejoiced that the Romans had turned woods and wildernesses into farming estates, that the cover of wild beasts had become grazing lands, and that marshes had been drained.¹⁰ Such criticism as did arise was motivated more by moral than by ecological considerations. It was seen as unnatural to interfere with the landscape, which had been divinely created. Yet for all these deleterious environmental effects, we should remember that most of the impact was relatively localized. Most forests, for example, were inaccessible to transport and so could not be economically exploited. Likewise, mines and quarries tended to affect only the ecology of their

immediate vicinity.

Alongside these domestic troubles, Rome continued to inflict military catastrophe on others. The emperor Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117 CE, won significant victories in the Near East but is perhaps most famous for his conquest of Dacia, modern Romania. Led by a troublesome, at least to the Romans, king, Decebalus, the Dacians resisted Trajan's two invasions vigorously. In the first campaign of 101 CE, the Roman troops won something of a Pyrrhic victory at the battle of Tapae, which left them short of troops. A further year's fighting saw Dacia reduced to the status of a client state, but with Decebalus still in charge. Trajan held a triumph back in Rome to mark his victory, but such celebrations were to prove premature. In 105, Decebalus again invaded Roman territory in an effort to raise a more widespread revolt among the Danubian tribes who were subjects of Rome. Trajan's response was to look for a permanent solution to the Dacian, Decebalan problem. Building a huge bridge across the Danube, Trajan steadily crushed Dacian resistance before successfully taking the capital, Sarmizegetusa Regia. Decebalus fled but, pursued and eventually cornered by Roman forces, he killed himself rather than face the indignity of being shipped off to Rome to be exhibited to the Roman crowds in another Dacian triumph. As it was, the Romans had to content themselves with seeing his severed head displayed on the steps of the Capitol. And later Trajan was to monumentalize the story of his crushing of the Dacians in the frieze on his column, as part of his new forum complex in Rome.



Mosaic showing the capture of a rhinoceros to be used in the games. Over-hunting led to the extinction of some animals from parts of the empire..

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The third century saw the boot on the other foot. Large-scale invasions by northern tribes and a reinvigorated Persian empire saw Rome suffer a series of military setbacks. The widespread political, economic and social dislocation these incursions caused are known collectively as the 'Third Century Crisis'. Parts of the empire that had been unscathed by war for generations now suffered sackings and pillaging. In response, the emperor Diocletian instigated a series of reforms that left the empire transformed. A larger, more mobile army was established to defend the borders, taxes were raised to pay for it, and a central bureaucracy was established to collect them. Power became more centralized around a far more autocratic image of the emperor. Whereas Augustus was styled *princeps*, first among equals, Diocletian was to be known as *dominus*, master. It was as if safety from the barbarians had been bought at the price of a more hierarchical, tougher society. Another of the Roman responses to the shock of the barbarian invasions had been to lay the blame on new and increasingly widespread minority religions, such as Christianity. In 250, at the height of the Gothic invasions, the emperor Decius attempted to reassert the traditional Roman religious values that had served them so well in the past and were now under threat from this new monotheistic menace. Diocletian also targeted the Christians and

other minority religions in 303. We have seen that scapegoating strange new religious sects, such as the Christians, was not a new tactic for the Romans in the aftermath of a disaster. Now, instead of targeting a few Christians in Rome itself, all the inhabitants of the empire were required to carry out a sacrifice before their local magistrates to Rome's ancestral gods, tasting both the wine and the sacrificial meat, 'for the safety of the empire'. As proof of having carried out this act, they would receive a certificate. Those Christians who refused to perform a ritual which was an anathema to their beliefs were liable to torture to force them to do so, or execution if they could not be so coerced. Although not prosecuted universally across the empire, the persecutions did inflict a disaster on a targeted group of imperial subjects. In the face of such attacks, it is not surprising that many Christians found solace in imagining the infliction of future disasters on the Romans themselves, in the forms of divinely wrought apocalypse.

The sudden conversion of the emperor Constantine to a religion such as Christianity in 312 must have come as a great shock to many, as if the British queen today were to become a Muslim. What had been an officially persecuted group now had the most powerful patron in the world. The Roman empire did not suddenly become Christian but over the fourth century Christianity was to become the dominant religion, with a specially built Christian capital city, Constantinople. The fact, though, that the Roman empire now owed its allegiance to Christ did not mean it stopped suffering disasters. For example, the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes the tsunami which struck the coast of the eastern Mediterranean on 21 July 365 CE. His account tells how an earthquake was followed by the sea's retreating, before rushing back to the shore. Ammianus dwells in detail on the strange sea-creatures that were revealed when the sea withdrew. He lists the many ships that were 'stranded as if on dry land', and he describes how people wandered among the pools of water collecting fish with their bare hands. The sea then roared back, driving inland and crushing whatever people and buildings lay in its path. He says that thousands were killed by drowning, with many ships that were out at sea also being wrecked in the carnage. Corpses were left floating both face-up and face-down, and huge ships were left perched on the tops of houses, with some being hurled as much as two miles inland.

Ammianus also provides us with an account of one of Rome's greatest military disasters – the battle of Adrianople in 378. Rashly taking on a force of Goths that had forcibly tried to settle within the empire, the emperor Valens suffered a defeat which left perhaps two-thirds of the Roman army of the east dead. The effect of this disastrous encounter

was to change the terms on which the Romans dealt with barbarians. Whereas previous barbarian groups wishing to settle within the empire had been accommodated on Roman terms, the Goths were now left to live within its frontiers while still owing their allegiance to their own Gothic kings. A powerful fifth column who could act as both friend and foe as it suited them, the Goths became an exemplar of what a barbarian tribe could achieve from occupying part of the Roman empire. It was at this time that the empire formally divided into two separate parts, each with its own court, army and officials. The Romans in the western half of the empire soon found themselves facing several rival barbarian tribes operating within its borders, all of them tearing away at the power and authority of the imperial government. Ultimately there was nothing left for the squabbling barbarians to fight over and, with the Roman empire in the west possessing neither power nor land nor forces, the western emperor was deemed an irrelevance and dismissed by his Gothic commander, Odoacer, in 476 CE.

Whether the fall of the western empire represented a disaster is an issue we shall revisit later. What is certain is that the end of Roman dominion in the west was not reflected in the eastern half of the Mediterranean. The eastern Roman empire, or, as it was later known, the Byzantine empire, survived and sometimes flourished until its eventual demise in the fall of Constantinople almost a millennium later in 1453. The fact that the eastern part of the Roman empire survived may simply have reflected the greater prosperity and population of those regions. But whatever the underlying cause for its continued existence, that did not give it any immunity from the pains of disaster. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* covers what it calls ‘the period of distress’ from 494 to 506 CE in the city of Edessa, in the east of modern Turkey, during which the inhabitants suffered a host of afflictions, ranging from a plague of locusts to war, famine and an epidemic. Shortly after, in 525, the city suffered a disastrous flood in which the historian Procopius states that about 30,000 people perished. The flood waters were so powerful as to wash away the city walls.

Other types of disaster also remained commonplace. The eastern empire occupied a geographical setting which was more prone to certain natural disasters, such as earthquakes. In 526, for example, the great city of Antioch suffered a massive earthquake, which killed many, including Euphrasius the patriarch. Late antiquity also saw no drop-off in the incidence of warfare. Cities in the border region with the Persian empire suffered from the endless cycle of attack and counter-attack which each side launched against the other. In his

account of the siege of Amida, in the east of modern Turkey, in 502, Joshua the Stylite says that 80,000 corpses were found after its fall. The vagaries of the Mediterranean climate meant as well that occasional famine continued to represent an inevitable part of life's trials and tribulations. In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea described the torment of those who starved in his bishopric, people whose flesh stretched across their bones like a spider's web, whose skin turned black, and whose sunken eyes could only watch while their families died about them.

The disaster to afflict the eastern Roman empire that stood out above all was the first outbreak in Europe of a disease that was to become infamous: the bubonic plague. Rome had suffered other plagues previously, most notably the Antonine plague, which lasted from about 165 to 180 ce. This plague may have been an outbreak of smallpox, which had been brought back by Roman soldiers who had been campaigning in the east. The contemporary historian Dio Cassius estimated that the disease was killing 2,000 a day in the city of Rome at its height, with as many as four times that being infected. The number of deaths caused by such epidemics will always be uncertain since we simply do not have the evidence to be able to produce reliable data. The same is true of the later outbreak of the bubonic plague. Procopius records that the contagion first appeared in the empire in 541 from the port of Pelusium in Egypt. Probably travelling by means of grain ships, the disease quickly spread. The historian Evagrius gives an account of his own suffering of the dreaded buboes – the massively swollen lymph glands produced by the infection – and though he was lucky enough to survive, he lost his wife, his daughter and numerous other members of his extended household. Procopius noted that so many were dying in Constantinople that there was no room left to bury them.

The history of Rome, therefore, can be seen to contain a long series of significant disasters. Disasters were mostly a structural part of Roman life – periodic regularities of the harsh environment in which most subsisted. Other catastrophic events, like the eruption of Vesuvius, were unique. But even in such one-off circumstances, the Roman responses generally revealed many of the same characteristics of their society as did other more regular crises. We should bear in mind that focusing on the big events, as I have in this brief overview, runs the risk of underestimating the importance of the kind of small, local disasters which I described in chapter 1. Also, with such a broad topic, I cannot hope to treat all types of disaster comprehensively. There are a number of examples which I only touch on, such as droughts (though I do deal with the food crises that these often caused), strikes

of lightning, and building collapse owing to shoddy construction techniques, poor maintenance or natural forces.

Students of ancient disaster confront the usual problems concerning sources for information about antiquity. Most of the documents we shall look at were created for other purposes and are suffused with the familiar excesses of ancient rhetoric. The evidence I shall put forward comes not only from elite histories and literary texts, but also from inscriptions and more popular sources such as joke books, manuals of dream interpretation and novels. In a book that tries to look at the place of disasters in Roman culture as a whole, I have not tried to pin down attitudes to precise timetables or periods, although I have tried to show their broad development. The relative lack of sources means that I have drawn on texts from a wide period, including many from the later Christian empire. One benefit of the subject of disasters is that there is a fair amount of evidence from the provinces, meaning that the discussion is not overly centred on the city of Rome.

And before we move on to the analytical chapters, there are three other important caveats to consider. The first is that we must remember that the quantity of ancient sources that survive relating to disasters is tiny in comparison with what there would be for a more modern event. We rarely have contemporary, eye-witness accounts, more often relying on the second-hand tales of biased ancient authors. Having said that, such literary sources still offer us the best way to understand something about the mentality of the ancient Romans. This lack of reliable data raises the second issue, which is that we must be alert to the risk of misapplying modern concepts to the ancient world. Modern disaster research is based on the study of events which have often been analysed in minute detail. This has allowed us to understand much about typical human behaviour during disasters and provides us with a powerful comparative tool with which to ask new questions of the ancient evidence. But we must be careful not to force the scraps of ancient evidence we have to fit modern ideas. In fact, as we shall see, the ancient sources often do not support modern claims and can actually help raise interesting questions about the use of evidence in modern disaster research. Finally, we must remember that, as we have seen in this short chapter, the Roman world changed significantly over the centuries. The empire's conversion to Christianity, in particular, was a development which affected the nature and biases of our surviving texts considerably. Christianity did not change everything, though, and often it is reasonable to see continuity in the attitudes and actions revealed in pagan and Christian writings. Later in the book, I shall examine more closely the many radical changes in thinking and in

focus which the Christian sources display.

The Disaster Experience

The earthquake hit suddenly. The buildings started to creak and showed signs of falling down and everyone panicked. They hurled themselves outside, abandoning their household possessions, and entrusted their survival to the public spaces. Sure enough, several buildings collapsed. Then to these calamities others were added: a flock of hundreds of sheep was killed, statues were cracked, and some people were so deranged that after the tremors had subsided they wandered about unable to help themselves.¹ This is how Seneca describes the impact of the earthquake of 62 CE which struck the region of Campania hard and severely damaged the ill-fated town of Pompeii. It gives us a graphic insight into the terror which an unexpected natural disaster could generate in ancient Rome. At a far less dramatic level, a tombstone of 120 CE from Asia Minor records the death in an earthquake in Nicomedia, in what is now north-west Turkey, of two young boys, Dexiphanes, aged 5, Thrason, aged 4, and their slave teacher, Hermes, who was 25 and died alongside them. A carved image shows Hermes holding a hand on the shoulder of each to console them, because ‘during the collapse he held them both in this way’. The boys’ father had set up the gravestone out of gratitude for the support that his slave had shown his sons during what was a terrifying final ordeal.² So great was the shock of the death of his friend Aristaenetus in an earthquake that it turned the orator Libanius’ hair white.³ Even during the multiple calamities of war, the onset of a terrible earthquake could be such a shock that ‘many men died of fright’.⁴ They were right to be afraid. An earthquake could decimate a city and its population. The fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes the effect on Nicomedia of a later earthquake: some were crushed by falling debris, others ‘were buried up to their necks, and might have survived had anyone helped them, but died for want of assistance; others hung impaled upon the sharp points of projecting timbers’. They were the lucky ones because they were killed instantly. Many were imprisoned unhurt within the slanting roofs of houses that had fallen over them, ‘to be consumed by the agony of starvation’. Or they were burned to death when a fire swept through the ruined town.⁵ Nor did the effects of a sudden-onset disaster stop once the event itself had passed. After an earthquake in Antioch, some of the survivors huddled on the mountain above the

city, and, according to the account by John of Ephesus, ‘made shelters for themselves out of rugs, straw and nets, and sat inside these during the difficult winter’.



Tombstone of a teacher and two of his pupils who died in an earthquake.

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The aim of this chapter is to give some sense of what it was like to experience a disaster in Roman society. The chapter tries to set out what were the principal short-term effects of disasters and analyse how people reacted to them. Disasters affected society in a variety of complex ways which extended well beyond the physical impact itself. They affected economic, religious and social life, often utterly disrupting the conventions of ordinary existence. People's reactions to these events were also various and multifaceted. Disaster 'mythology' – in the sense of what people today generally believe about disasters – has it that in the face of disaster, people panic, embark on a looting spree, or sit passively, numbed in shock, while wild rumours fly about them. In fact, we shall see that a far wider range of responses can be found to have occurred in the Roman world.⁶

The physical effects of disaster could be, as we have already seen, dramatic. But not even two earthquakes were always the same. The second-century writer Pausanias describes how there are two different

types of earthquake: those with a counteracting shock in the opposite direction, in which 'pillars may be seen righting themselves ... split walls coming together to their original position', and a second form, which 'brings destruction like a battering ram'.⁷ The sixth-century lawyer Agathias mentions buildings and roofs yawning apart before coming back together, with the columns catapulted high into the air.⁸ After an earthquake in the city of Cyzicus, in modern Turkey, most of the city was left supported and buttressed with cedar beams.⁹ Strabo records that the city of Philadelphia, also now in Turkey, suffered tremors so frequently that the inhabitants planned all their structures with a view to their occurrence.¹⁰ But most places did not have any inbuilt disaster protection. Many buildings in antiquity were of wooden construction, which, particularly in the crowded urban context, left them vulnerable to secondary fires in the aftermath of an earthquake. People relied on lamps for heating and light and these quickly set alight collapsed wooden structures.¹¹ For the people inhabiting towns such as these, the effects of an earthquake could be utterly disorienting. Agathias describes how tremors were followed by 'a deep, growling sound like thunder issuing from the bowels of the earth, which doubled the general sense of terror and alarm'. Not only that, but the surrounding air 'grew dim with the vaporous exhalations of a smoky haze rising from an unknown source, and gleamed with a dull radiance'.¹² What is also clear from these accounts is that the kind of information we generally receive from ancient sources is not the kind of statistical analysis we might expect from a modern-day report. We usually lack simple facts about the basic dimensions of the disaster, relating to such aspects as its scope, speed of onset, duration and the level of social preparedness. These were not matters which concerned ancient writers. Instead we get cracked statues and dead sheep. And when we are given facts and figures about fatalities and the extent of damage, we shall also see that usually these do not appear to be reliable.

Confronted with the devastation that disasters could wreak, it would not be surprising if people panicked. Indeed we do find numbers of ancient accounts describing the sheer terror that being caught up in a catastrophic situation could generate. During the Great Fire of 64 CE in Rome, when Nero purportedly had henchmen, while pretending to be drunk, starting various fires, an 'extraordinary excitement laid hold of all the citizens', such that 'they ran about in different directions, as if distracted'.¹³ The fact that many coins have been found in the forum, which appear to be the small change of some of the fire's unfortunate victims, shows that it was moving quickly and gave people little or no time to escape. Many were so crazed by the disaster that they are

described as 'leaping into the very flames'. This might agree with what we would imagine would be the normal human response to bursts of intense fear. In fact, modern research into people's reactions suggests that panic is fairly rare and tends to be triggered by a truly exceptional situation.¹⁴ In 1915, when the cruise liner RMS *Lusitania* sank off the south coast of Ireland after being torpedoed by a German U-boat, it took just 18 minutes for the ship to go down. In such a context, selfish behaviour predominated. People could see all too clearly what was happening so quickly around them and panicked. By contrast, the more drawn-out sinking of the *Titanic* over a period of 2 hours 40 minutes saw societal norms of behaviour reassert themselves. As a result, class factors had time to re-establish themselves, meaning that social status conferred a relative advantage and the first-class passengers were therefore far more likely to survive.¹⁵ Panic, in other words, seems to happen when a fear arises that the escape route is about to be closed. Several stampedes in crowded night clubs, for example, have occurred when fires have made people inside think rightly or wrongly that they had to rush to get out of the building. And if we look further at Dio's account of the Great Fire in Rome, we find that it is a similar situation that caused the widespread panic. There was, he says, a great pushing of the crowd, and many were suffocated and trampled in their desperation to evade the flames, because they could see that there was no easy escape. Tacitus' account emphasizes that the town was an easy prey to fire, 'owing to the narrow, twisting lanes and formless streets typical of old Rome'.¹⁶ The crowd, crushed into these confined spaces, had no chance. Seneca rationalizes this behaviour in his discussion of the phenomenon of earthquakes. He explains that disasters, however bad, usually still offer some means of escape. There are wells to hide in from enemies, roofs to avoid flood waters, harbours to shelter from storms, caves to cower at lightning, and there is flight to avoid the heat of fire and the outbreak of plague. But 'what solace – I do not say what help – can there be for you when fear has lost a way of escape?'¹⁷

Immobility seems to be an equally common reaction to the sudden stress brought on by a disaster. Dio's description relates how 'some might be seen standing speechless, as if they were dumb'. Agathias describes how, when an earthquake struck the Greek island of Cos, the effect was to leave some utterly despondent: 'here and there could be seen a few men whose haggard and dejected faces wore a look of hopeless apathy'.¹⁸ So it seems clear that Roman responses were as varied as those modern researchers have found in the occurrence of modern disasters. Some try to escape from the cause of the disasters, some are struck dumb with fear or simply deny that anything is

happening, others are so scared they behave completely irrationally. Modern attempts to quantify the percentages of the population who can be expected to react in these ways suggests that approximately 10–20 per cent will act rationally, 75 per cent in a bewildered fashion, and 10–15 per cent in an inappropriate or even crazy way.

At first glance, the evidence from Roman literary sources supports these kinds of figures. For example, Agathias' account of an earthquake that hit Constantinople in 551 CE describes how the tremors were even felt in Alexandria, in Egypt, which was an 'unprecedented phenomenon'. 'Nobody stayed indoors', he says; instead the populace congregated in the streets, 'seized with unwarranted panic at the suddenness and novelty of the event'. Agathias was actually staying in Alexandria at the time and even an educated, rational lawyer, as he was, found himself dumbstruck by the relatively modest event: 'I must confess I was quite overcome with fear considering the faintness of the tremors.' Partly he explains his terror by claiming that 'it seemed reasonable to expect the same thing would happen again'.¹⁹ Experience or knowledge of the devastating effects of other more serious earthquakes may also have generated a far greater reaction than would otherwise be warranted. Yet it is also possible to see the population's response as a rational survival strategy, not simply as an unnecessary panic. This was an urban environment where people were expected to save themselves. They would not look for firemen to rescue them. They therefore immediately took matters into their own hands and got themselves outside, away from the danger of falling buildings. Getting into open ground was a sensible strategy in most ancient towns. This was because the urban layout usually incorporated a variety of open spaces, such as a forum, a circus, gardens and a wide main street. When a flood hit the city of Rhodes in 316 BCE, Diodorus explains that it did little damage to the population since the city was 'newly founded and therefore contained much open space'.²⁰ One factor which could exacerbate the impact of a disaster was the time of day when it occurred. Tacitus refers to an earthquake destroying twelve important cities in Asia during the night. This made the usual effects even worse, since 'even the usual resource in these catastrophes, a rush to open ground, was unavailable, and the fugitives were swallowed up in yawning chasms'.²¹

Running away from the disaster did not automatically mean that people were panicking. Flight from an afflicted home area represented a sensible course of action, when the alternative was to remain in a place that was left exceptionally dangerous because of half-fallen buildings and, in some circumstances, a higher risk of disease from

unburied corpses. In the face of threats such as foreign invasions, people would try to flee from affected cities to more secure areas. Officials sometimes tried to prevent this because it clogged up vital lines of communication for the military. During a famine at the city of Amida, people fled from one place to another and from one city to another in their desperate search for safety.²² Nor did running away, like rushing outside in an earthquake, necessarily represent an expression of selfish individualism. Many people assume that in life-and-death situations, self-interest predominates and social cohesion disintegrates. In fact, it is often the case that pro-social behaviour dominates in such contexts. Disasters can induce outbreaks of great care and communal concern, a state of social euphoria generated by the forging together of a community of sufferers. Mutual aid is commonplace and people tend to assemble into their primary social groups before leaving the disaster site, even at the cost of delaying their evacuation. In Rome's Great Fire, Tacitus describes how the fleeing crowd of women, children and men kept checking on others or were dragging along the infirm. Or they 'paused to wait for them', all of which combined to impede everything.²³ This was not a selfish panic. It can rather be seen as an affiliative rush, whereby people tried to stay together as a unit, moving as fast as the slowest member of that unit would allow them. Flight, therefore, is not necessarily an expression of disordered selfishness. It can be a reaffirmation of social relationships, which sees people move closer to the familiarity of each other in order to move collectively away from the unfamiliarity of the disaster experience. Acts of great personal heroism represent the pinnacle of this kind of pro-social activity. They reject the normal rules of self-interest, ignore personal danger and fear, and dramatically reassert the worth of the communal bond. But of course such communal behaviour cannot be expected to last for long. Once the immediate threat has receded, the usual norms of behaviour tend to come back into the foreground. Hence Procopius noted in his history of the great plague, which started during the reign of Justinian in 541 CE, that when the crisis was at its height, 'those of the population who had formerly been members of the circus factions laid aside their mutual enmity and in common they attended to the burial rites of the dead'.²⁴ But once the plague had gone, 'they reverted to their wicked ways'.



Skeletons of victims in Herculaneum who had probably gone to the shore to try to escape by sea.

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Disasters clearly generate extremes of emotions, from panic and terror to selfless kindness, sympathy and sorrow. One of the main reasons for this is that disasters tend to place families and homes at great risk. The second-century dream interpreter Artemidorus reveals the close connection between location and family when he says that to dream of one's home town signifies one's parents. That disasters posed a common threat to these loved ones is revealed by the fact that when a man dreamt that his native town was destroyed in an earthquake, his father was condemned to death and died. Similarly, the parts of the house were synonymous with the parts of the family: the bedroom signified the wife, the storeroom the household possessions, a wall with a door the master, and a wall with a window the mistress.²⁵ Augustine notes that when people had to leave the city of Constantinople because of the threat of imminent destruction, they 'looked back at their sweet dwellings, and with tearful voices they said farewell to their beloved homes'.²⁶ Family and home, therefore, became the focus of people's concern during the event and became the context for the display of most altruistic behaviour. In his account of his family's flight from Misenum, close by Pompeii, Pliny the Younger describes how a friend of his uncle's from Spain urged them to leave, arguing that if their uncle was still alive he would want them saved, but that if he had died he would want his family to survive him. Such

concerns probably reflected not only anxieties about the safety of family members but also dynastic concerns for the survival of the family line. Pliny recounts that 'we replied that we would not think of considering our own safety as long as we were uncertain of his'. Pliny's mother begged him to leave, for as a young man he might escape, 'whereas she was old and slow and could die in peace so long as she had not been the cause of my death too'. But Pliny refused to go ahead and simply dragged her along more quickly than before.²⁷

Lack of information heightens concern for missing family members. People often drift around after the initial impact of a disaster looking for their lost relatives, behaviour which can give the appearance of undirected apathy or inaction. The despair can be such that, as Tacitus found after the Rome fire, some lose the will to live.²⁸ Lack of information could also make matters worse for the relatives of the dead. After the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenae in 27 CE, the surviving relatives quarrelled over the mutilated, unrecognizable corpses whose identity was undeterminable.²⁹ Those who were lucky enough to find their missing relatives alive after an earthquake in Constantinople 'moved forward to meet one another gazing joyfully into the faces of their nearest and dearest, kissing and embracing and weeping with delight and surprise'.³⁰ It was one of the most distressing features of a prolonged and severe famine that it eroded even these strong, familial ties, forcing people into such practices as selective feeding, child abandonment and even cannibalism.

In a situation where hard information was impossible to find, rumour spread easily. In John of Ephesus' account of the trials suffered by the city of Amida in 559–60 CE, he describes how many people were suddenly alarmed and terror-struck when they heard a false rumour that the Persian king was about to invade the city. It might seem easy to criticize people for listening to such fake stories but rumour offered them their only source of information, however unreliable, about issues which were critical to their survival. Communication between authorities and the general population was poor, coordinated response to most disasters was lacking, and, perhaps most importantly, there was simply no official interest in warning the public apart from in certain specific contexts, which we shall explore later. Warning is a social process, and in the Roman world most people did not qualify as being worthy of receiving such advance information as did exist from credible, authoritative sources. Paying attention to the content of rumours was, therefore, a sensible thing to do. Rumour represented the only means most Romans had for assessing and avoiding impending risks or for finding out what had happened to their loved ones after a disaster had struck. We see this in Dio's account of the

Rome fire, where in the chaos after the fires had started, people, ‘while assisting their neighbour’, stopped to ask, ‘where?’, ‘how did it happen?’ and ‘what started it?’³¹ The sudden, extreme stress created by the disaster situation brought great focus among the people on the need for information regarding its cause and, therefore, its probable extent and seriousness. The fact that many people seem to have believed that the emperor himself was responsible for having started the blaze would only have emphasized to them the severity of the situation, since an emperor usually got what he wanted. Of course, such a reputed cause may also have simply been invented after the event in order to find a cause that was itself sufficiently powerful to have created so large-scale a disaster in the first place.

People acted quickly to pass on this oral information to others in the same predicament. During the alarms in Amida, John describes how, ‘as they were fleeing to all sides and to all regions’, they spread the rumour that the city had been captured to all those they met and said ‘escape!’. This was not simple rumour-mongering but an act of social solidarity towards their fellow citizens who were facing the same risks. In such a fraught environment, it is perhaps not surprising that some people did panic and became over-imaginative in their tale-telling. In the commotion after the eruption of Vesuvius, Pliny records that ‘there were people, too, who added to the real perils by inventing fictitious dangers: some reported that part of Misenum had collapsed or another part was on fire, and though their tales were false, they found others to believe them’.³² It is also not surprising that many people were receptive to such misleading information. It was surely better to err on the side of caution and believe the worst than to reject what might otherwise be life-saving information. This is not to say that people did not think badly of those who spread rumours. John’s account of Amida puts the blame for the false rumours specifically at the hands of a band of ‘rebellious demons’. False rumours, in other words, were associated with acts of wickedness – or ‘evil error’ as John puts it – because they were capable of generating such alarm among the populace.

The disorderly spread of information among the population as a whole was commonplace in ancient disasters. In fact, disorder itself was one of the characteristics of disasters in general. Disasters fundamentally disrupted the routines of everyday life. Partly this was because disasters tended to overwhelm the ancient authorities’ ability to respond to the difficulties they presented. Procopius noted that during the great plague of 541 CE, it was not possible to see a single man in Constantinople wearing the chlamys, the official dress.³³ But it was also because danger and death had an equalizing effect. Such a

dissolution of social distinctions was a profoundly threatening occurrence in the fiercely hierarchical world of the Roman empire. Agathias describes how an earthquake seemed to shatter not only the buildings but even the proper ordering and decorum of society. He notes that 'large numbers of women and not just the members of the lower class, but even persons of breeding and distinction, roamed about and mingled freely with the men'. The result of this was a loss in the expected deference for title and honour: 'the ordered structure of society with its due observance of decorum and respect for privilege and the proper distinctions of rank was thrown into wild confusion and trampled under foot'. Perhaps most shocking of all was that the disruption and panic of the disaster context even allowed slaves an opportunity to flout the strict rules governing their behaviour: 'slaves, in the grip of the present and more compelling fear, showed contempt for their masters'. They even disobeyed their instructions and 'congregated in the places of worship', presumably to pray for their safe deliverance.³⁴ One inscription from the time of Tiberius records how 107 publicly owned slaves from Kibyra in Asia Minor took advantage of an earthquake to flee the town, only later being forcibly repatriated.³⁵

The increase in disorder was also reflected in perceptions of an increase in criminal behaviour following disasters. Turning again to Dio's account of the Great Fire, we find that men 'were stealing the property of others', and in the great pushing of the crowd the night-watchmen went about kindling new fires instead of putting them out, since they were keen to exploit the opportunities to plunder victims' possessions. Herodian claims that during another fire in Rome, the entire possessions of some rich men 'were looted by criminals and the lower class, who mixed with the soldiers in order to do just this'.³⁶ John of Ephesus' description of the Justinianic plague recounts that so many died that their household belongings were left unguarded and the doors of their houses lay open to looters to help themselves. Such stories are frequent following any disaster period, yet modern research suggests that crime rates generally fall and social solidarity increases in the aftermath of a disaster. Looting might be rare, but victims are clearly so anxious about losing their possessions that they tend to believe rumours that confirm their fears. The lack of evidence makes it impossible to say whether the same can be said of the Roman world. What is noticeable from John of Ephesus' account, though, is that those who looted the houses of the dead were themselves struck down by the plague in an act of divine retribution. Likewise, he tells us that in one village on the Egyptian border only seven men survived, who went about stealing all the valuables of the dead, but were then

themselves killed by the affliction. It would be reassuring to think that justice always worked with such divinely ruthless efficiency. It is probably more likely that we should see these stories as morality tales which express the kind of concerns which people generally had during a disaster and the kind of story they liked to hear to help them allay those fears.

Disasters can inhibit the normal restraints on what is considered to be antisocial behaviour. The breaking down of social norms is seen in its most extreme form in stories of cannibalism resulting from intense privation during a famine or siege. During serious food shortages in Rome, for example, the early sixth-century historian Zosimus tells us that the sellers in the market-place hid what few goods they had in the hope of making a fortune by profiteering. As a consequence, the city was reduced to such distress that the cry went up in the circus, 'put a price on human flesh!' as if to persuade the authorities to legitimize such an act.³⁷ Whether this kind of behaviour was actually widespread is impossible to ascertain. The dream-interpreter Artimidorus asserts that 'it is natural to seek such food only in the face of great want, such as occurs in times of war and famine'.³⁸ He also claims that if a rich man dreams that he is having sexual intercourse with himself, it signifies, among other things, great hunger, since there is no other body present. Is this because the missing body represents his withering away, or is a general symbol of want, or has it literally been eaten by the survivor? What these accounts of cannibalism do suggest, though, is that disasters could force people into breaking taboos concerning acceptable human behaviour, and the very fear of that, whether justified or not, meant that writers were keen to include such episodes in their accounts.

The breakdown in social norms was also seen in the effect that disasters often had on death and burial rituals. Many ancient disaster accounts give vivid descriptions of the stench of the bodies piling up following the arrival of a plague, or the corpses floating away like foam on the tide after a flood.³⁹ It is worth noting that some disasters, such as drought and famine, will also have resulted in a high level of animal mortality. One of the effects of high human mortality was, as we have seen, to act as a great leveller: 'all ages were humiliated', says John, 'all statures were bent and degraded in one wine press of wrath, and all ranks were pressed on the top of each other'. Once mortality rates rose significantly, they exceeded the limited capacity of the city's body-collectors to remove them. Normal rituals were unable to cope with this overload. Eusebius describes how there were funerals and dirges everywhere, with two or three bodies being carried in the same funeral train.⁴⁰ Likewise, Procopius remarks how during the great

plague of 541, in the beginning each man 'attended to the burial of the dead of his own house'; but they did so by increasingly abhorrent and desperate means: they threw them 'even into the tombs of others', either secretly or violently; 'but afterwards confusion and disorder everywhere became complete'. In the end, 'all the customary rites of burial were overlooked', with no procession or the usual chants taking place.⁴¹ Disasters, therefore, changed the nature of death in that what was normally a private, occasional event marked by studied ritual became public, frequent and uniform. It was one of the acts of generosity that an emperor might perform to provide money for the recovery and proper disposal of the many unburied corpses following a disaster.⁴²



Relief of a funeral procession. Elaborate rituals such as these often ceased when disaster had caused high numbers of casualties.
Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Disasters could cause severe disruption to the economy. The effects on urban business of the plague are outlined by John of Ephesus in his fourth account: 'selling and buying itself ceased, and shops full of all kinds of earthly wealth beyond description, important money exchanges, indeed the entire city, ground to a halt'. Similarly, Procopius states that 'work of every description ceased, and all the trades were abandoned by the artisans'.⁴³ The result of this collapse in trade was food shortage, since there was no one left to carry out the supply, distribution and sale of goods. The financial impact could also be significant. During the huge fire in Rome of 238 CE, the temple of Peace, 'the largest and most beautiful building in the city', was razed to the ground. This was economically important because the temple was also the richest in Rome, since it was adorned with offerings of gold and silver that had been placed there for safety. 'Everyone', Herodian claims, 'used it as a deposit for his possessions.' That night, therefore, saw many rich people reduced to penury by the fire. Interestingly Herodian also adds that, 'though everyone joined in deploring the destruction of public property, each person was thinking of his own private loss'.⁴⁴ This suggests that there was a pressure to adopt a communal attitude towards the loss, even if the wealthy were in fact more concerned with the fate of their own assets. This does not suggest that wealth enabled the rich to act in a purely self-interested manner, even when their own interests were themselves under grave threat.

During the Justinianic plague, John claims that the effect was so terrible that people forgot about money and wills and possessions. This is not supported by accounts of other disasters, which may of

course just reflect the impression of unprecedented severity which John's account of the plague is trying to generate. The anonymous first-century poem *Etna*, for example, describes what happened when people were hit by an eruption of the Sicilian volcano and the mountainside 'burst open its caverns and glowed white-hot as though its deep-pent furnaces were shattered'. Everyone battled to save his possessions 'with such courage and strength as avails him to snatch at them'. Everyone made for safety with what he held dear upon his shoulders, struggling under the weight of the goods they were trying to carry away from danger: 'one groans beneath a burden of gold, another collects his arms and piles them again about his foolish neck, another, faint under what he has seized, has his flight hindered by his poems'. In a moral twist the poem claims that the poor man is actually at an advantage, because he 'hastens nimbly beneath the lightest of loads'. By contrast the greedy who linger to save their possessions are enveloped in flame, and the fire spares 'none or only the dutiful'.⁴⁵ That disasters were ever a boon for the poor is unlikely. The loss of what little resources they did possess meant that many seem to have fallen into debt from the need to borrow money to survive in the short term. This was at a time when the economic impact meant that many lost their livelihoods, at least for a period. It is possible that the longer-term impact of some severe disasters may have been more positive in that massive mortality in traditional societies often leads to an increase in the cost of labour. We can see some evidence of this in John's fifth account of the great plague, where those who carry away corpses for burial start charging high fees. Three men make as much as 450 dinars before saying to themselves, 'let us take these dinars and leave the city'. But in this moralistic tale, once they have divided the money, each 'slumped to his side, fell down and died'.

Disasters could offer attractive opportunities for financial gain. We have seen that this could be simply the result of looting by society's have-nots: 'The entire possessions of some rich men were looted by criminals and the lower class.'⁴⁶ Famines could also provide traders with a golden opportunity to corner the market: 'the sellers in the market-place hid what goods they had in the hope of making a fortune by profiteering'.⁴⁷ The third man of the first Triumvirate with Caesar and Pompey, Crassus, famously made his fortune by buying up property in Rome on the cheap from distressed sellers. He had noticed how often Rome was hit by fires and how people died and buildings collapsed as a result, 'owing to their being too massive and close together'. He therefore proceeded to buy over 500 slaves who were architects and builders, and would make rock-bottom offers to owners of houses that were on fire and houses which adjoined them, whom

fear and uncertainty would turn into panic sellers. 'In this way', says Plutarch, 'a large part of Rome came into his possession.'⁴⁸ Far more modest opportunities for personal gain could also stem from preying on the fears of the general populace. The emperor Marcus Aurelius pardoned one man who, in order to 'plunder the city', continually made speeches from a wild fig tree on the Campus Martius, to the effect that fire would fall down from heaven and the end of the world would come should he fall from the tree and be turned into a stork, whereupon he would drop down while surreptitiously freeing a stork from his robe in order to generate alarm.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most widespread disruption that disasters caused in ancient society was in religious behaviour. In a world where belief in gods was near universal, this was a particularly important occurrence. Not surprisingly, many turned to religion when confronted with the terrifying events which a disaster could precipitate. During the eruption of Vesuvius, Pliny noted that 'many besought the aid of the gods'.⁵⁰ Likewise, when the holy man Apollonius of Tyana stayed in Antioch, the city was holding an assembly when a major earthquake occurred. Immediately, the citizens all cowered and, 'as usually happens in divine visitations', they prayed for one another.⁵¹ Christians in particular seem to have had their religiosity increased by the onset of a disaster. During the rumblings of an earthquake and a terrifying storm, all the people of Edessa fled to the Martyrs' Church to take refuge with the bones of the saints.⁵² When flood waters came pouring into the city, breaching the walls and collapsing its towers, on that very day a cross of light was seen in the sky. All the survivors therefore shouted, 'Lord have mercy' while staring at it for an entire hour.⁵³ Similarly, during an earthquake in Alexandria, the people, panic-stricken, poured out of their houses, but 'their fear and anxiety seemed to subside gradually at the mere possibility of somehow turning their eyes towards heaven in an attempt to propitiate the deity'.⁵⁴ Some called for intensified religious expression as an immediate response to a crisis: after an earthquake in Constantinople and Nicomedia, it was claimed that it called for a 'life of repentance'. The people were therefore assiduous in making prayers in churches, and spending the nights in them.⁵⁵ But it was not only Christians who increased their religious fervour. Certain 'hysterical individuals' near Vesuvius were driven by the stress of the ongoing eruption to issue dire forecasts about what was going to happen, making their own and other people's calamities 'seem ludicrous in comparison with their frightful predictions'.⁵⁶

But the effect of disaster was not only to turn up the volume of people's religious expression. Scepticism could also be a response. The

emperor Augustus refused to carry an image of the sea-god Neptune in a procession after storms had destroyed two of his fleets. Likewise, a crowd of Romans expressed their anger at the death of Augustus' popular great-nephew Germanicus by stoning statues of the gods in temples and renouncing their allegiance to them. This twin reaction to disasters, of turning both to and away from religion, was noted by Pliny after Vesuvius' eruption: 'many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore'. Thucydides had already noted that during the onset of plague in Athens, the most dreadful thing about the whole disease was the despondency of the victims, for when they became aware they were sick, their minds immediately yielded to despair. Not only that, but there had been an increase in indifference to religion among the Athenians.⁵⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that disasters might undermine the confidence and faith that people had in their normal divine relationships. In the face of calamitous losses why would some not believe that the gods had abandoned them? As Seneca argued, people who have undergone shocks and have been placed in great fear during an earthquake are unlikely to find anything quite as solid and reliable as they had before: 'can anything seem adequately safe to anyone if the world itself is shaken and its most solid parts collapse?'⁵⁸

The intensification or destruction of normal religious behaviour did not usually last long. The Christian preacher John Chrysostom, in his 41st Homily on the Acts of the Apostles, describes how many Christians in the town of Nicomedia had been shaken out of their complacency by a recent earthquake. They all ran to church to be baptized; even the 'whoremongers, the effeminate, and the corrupt' left their usual haunts and found religion. But three days later, he complains, 'they returned again to their own wickedness'. John attributes this to their 'excessive laziness', but it seems to have been a common response to post-disaster situations. Agathias describes a similar effect during a night-time earthquake. To begin with everyone awoke with great shrieks and lamentations. The 'usual pious ejaculations that spring spontaneously to the lips in such moments of crisis' could be heard throughout the town. Everyone was terrified and, as a consequence, 'prayers and hymns of supplication were heard in every quarter'. Agathias describes how dramatic the change in people's behaviour could be, when 'the ideals to which people constantly pay lip-service but rarely put into practice were then eagerly pursued':

Everybody suddenly became just in his dealings towards his neighbour, so much so that even the magistrates gave up all thoughts

of personal gain and began to administer justice in accordance with the laws, and those who were influential in some way lived quietly and peacefully, refraining from the most shameful abuses and leading generally virtuous lives. Some even completely changed their mode of life and embraced a solitary existence in the hills, renouncing property and privilege and all that is most pleasing to mankind. Many donations were brought to the churches and prominent citizens walked the streets at night distributing free gifts of blankets and food in abundance to the helpless and pitiful wrecks who lay maimed and mutilated in great numbers.

But, as Agathias complains, all these good deeds were only performed for a limited period of time, 'as long as the terror was still fresh in people's minds'. As soon as the danger had receded most people reverted to their previous behaviour. Their reactions had represented short-term adjustments aimed at escaping and averting a passing crisis. 'It is in fact', Agathias pessimistically concludes, 'only under the stimulus of sudden fear and for as long as the emergency lasts that we make a few reluctant and perfunctory concessions to the ideal of charity.'⁵⁹

Roman reactions to disasters were complex and varied. They do not always support modern accounts of people's behaviour during times of extreme stress. One of the most important problems which affected the ancients was a lack of information, and this may have resulted in more exaggerated reactions to what to us might seem very poor-quality information flows. In such a context, 'panic' and belief in rumour can serve as a means to play safe and flee from any possible danger. When they did strike, disasters could seriously disrupt the norms of Roman life, both in practical and economic ways and also in the cultural and religious spheres. But the fact that the usual rules of behaviour were suspended, albeit for sometimes only a matter of days, does not automatically mean that Roman society fell into chaos. It seems that at times of extreme stress, new, more appropriate norms of behaviour came into temporary force. Both loud and exaggerated expressions of religious ideas and a rejection of those same ideals could represent a means for Romans to cope with the extreme abnormality of the situation. Once the immediate threat had passed, a return to more normal rules became possible. Roman society was, in this way, able to show strong resilience to many of the disasters which afflicted it. For the Romans had plenty of ways of dealing with the aftermath of disasters.

Dealing with the Aftermath

The Romans were not just passive in the face of disasters. They responded to them actively in a number of ways. This chapter looks at some of the practical strategies that they turned to in dealing with the aftermath. It also asks whether in the Roman world disasters had the effect of forcing the profound social transformations and cultural adaptations which studies of disasters have found in some modern societies.¹ My strong impression is that the Roman experience was different: their responses to disaster reveal Roman society's capacity for resilience, even in the face of events which stress-tested their core beliefs. The ways that the Romans reacted to extreme situations tended to reflect and reinforce pre-existing links between local communities and their political and religious leaders. Disasters allowed the existing hierarchy an opportunity to reassert its dominance and the supposed benefits that dominance could bring to all of society. These characteristics of Roman disaster responses continued into the Christian empire, although with new forms being developed for the deliverance of disaster relief.

The simplest and most immediate response to an event like an earthquake was a search-and-rescue strategy. But whereas this is a common response in the modern world, involving a highly centralized and organized effort that then involves days of painstaking work to locate and carefully dig out trapped victims, the Roman searches seem to have been more voluntary and local, often based on established social networks. The lack of an organized response can be seen in an incident in Antioch in 115 CE when the emperor Trajan was wintering there. An earthquake struck in which 'many lost legs or arms, some had their skulls smashed, and still others vomited blood'.² The tremors continued for several days and nights, and it was only then, 'when at last the evil had subsided', that someone ventured to mount the ruins. They caught sight of a woman still alive. She was not alone, her child was with her, and they had survived because she had fed both herself and her child with her own milk. They found one other infant still sucking at the breast of its dead mother. The account is primarily concerned not with the victims or how people tried to help them but with the curiosity of the survival tale.

The Younger Pliny's account of his uncle's involvement in the eruption of Vesuvius provides an interesting parallel. The Elder Pliny was at the time in command of a Roman fleet at the nearby port of Misenum and was therefore well placed to mount a rescue mission. Pliny recounts how his uncle had been out in the sun, had taken a cold bath, and lunched while lying down, before turning his hand to working at his books. This was the kind of gentleman's life of leisure that military leadership during times of peace often entailed. Seeing the eruption and being a man of letters who was also interested in natural phenomena, he went, not to help, but in order to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. He then received a letter from a wealthy Roman lady, called Rectina, whose house was at the foot of the mountain and who was trapped, with escape possible only by boat. Terrified, she implored him to come and rescue her from her fate. At once, Pliny informs us, his uncle changed his plans, and 'what he had begun in a spirit of inquiry he completed as a hero'. He gave orders for the warships to be launched, and went on board himself with the intention of bringing help to many more people besides Rectina, 'for this lovely stretch of coast was thickly populated'.³ It is striking that it was only in response to a personal plea from a social equal that Pliny felt impelled to act. Up to that point, his interest had been focused on the physical effects and phenomena that the eruption was throwing up before his inquiring eyes. Now, with Rectina's letter (presumably sent by means of a carrier pigeon or some slave being forced to risk his life), the disaster took on a social aspect. Pliny moved into rescue mode, which in his nephew's account of some twenty-five years later was clearly portrayed not as a normal response of a military commander but as a sure sign of his uncle's extraordinary bravery. It would be interesting to know who Pliny had in mind when referring to the dense population of the region. For this was a stretch of coast where many of the wealthy of Rome had holiday villas. Was it people like Rectina whom he wanted to rescue or did he have in mind more ordinary Romans, or even their slaves? Given that slaves were possessions, 'tools that could speak' as defined by Roman law, any desire to save them would not necessarily have sprung from any feelings of shared humanity but more probably have resulted from a desire to preserve wealth.

On the other hand, a later Christian disaster account by John of Ephesus emphasizes the fate of the common people and focuses on the details of how they tried to help each other. In 525 CE, the city of Edessa suffered severe flooding. It carried away houses, courtyards, palaces, public bath houses and other objects, 'including even the stones and wood of many buildings'. But once the waters had

subsided, and ‘the city became free of water for many days’, those who had survived dug and uncovered the bodies and their possessions ‘in great sorrow and bitter grief’. John tells us that men, women, children and infants were still being found alive after thirty or forty days. It seems that there was an upsurge in voluntary popular activity in the period following the disaster, aimed at proving the communal benefit of finding victims, both alive and dead, and restoring property to its owners.

These stories suggest that the Roman authorities under-reacted to disaster. Such involvement as did take place happened for political reasons or through social connections. The official nonchalance is shown by the lack of interest in the sources in the plight or behaviour of the ordinary people caught up in disasters. The Christian manuscripts lift the lid on this and provide the missing complement to the elite narrative. Self-help was a more reliable response than waiting for the Roman authorities to come to help. In famines, for example, the starving could pursue a range of strategies to alleviate and cope with their suffering.⁴ They could move, sell possessions, beg, protest, steal, consume unfamiliar foodstuffs, or turn to family and friends for help. The volatile climate of the Mediterranean region, a poor transport and supply network, war and maladministration meant that food supply was frequently disrupted, so it was not uncommon for people to have to deal with food shortages of varying degrees of intensity.⁵ To cope with this permanent threat, people could adopt strategies of risk reduction, by means of diversification of income streams, actively shaping the size of the family unit through disposing of unwanted infants, and maintaining a network of social relations that could prove helpful in times of distress. It is clear that the family acted as a buffering mechanism that could provide a kind of disaster insurance by means of offering alternative avenues to appeal for possible assistance and by providing some flexibility in the size of the want that needed to be satisfied. It might be that the rural population were better placed than town-dwellers in as much as they could turn to hunter-gathering and the substitution of strange foods for normal produce. Towns, though, had the benefit of being the place where the elite exercised their power and could act to alleviate shortage if it so suited them. But even then, peasants also had the possibility of flocking into cities to try to obtain food in times of food crisis. As a last resort, all people also had the options of selling or even eating their own children in order to alleviate their want, although the unattractiveness of such a choice hardly needs emphasizing.⁶



Terracotta relief from Ostia of a man milling grain. Food crises and famines were a regular feature of Roman life.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Eusebius gives us a vivid illustration of these strategies at work. His account of a famine which had been made worse by the onset of plague and other disease tells us that ‘countless was the number of those who were dying in the cities, and still larger of those in the country parts and villages, with the result that the registers, which formerly had the names of a numerous rural population, were now all but entirely wiped out’. Some bartered their dearest possessions in one lot, others sold off goods little by little. Others ‘injured their bodily health and died from chewing small wisps of hay and recklessly eating certain pernicious herbs’. Some well-born ladies in the cities were driven by their want to ‘shameless necessity’, and went out begging in the market-places, displaying a proof of their noble upbringing by their ‘shamefacedness and the decency of their apparel’. The starving cried out for morsels of bread with their last gasps, and the dead lay

in the midst of the market-places and alleys, naked and unburied for many days. Some were eaten by dogs and for this reason those who were alive turned to killing dogs, for fear lest the animals might 'acquire a taste for human flesh and start devouring the living'.⁷ Likewise, Joshua the Stylite describes a famine where the rural poor were forced to move to try to find food. The healthy left their own districts and moved to other regions of the north and west. But those in the villages who were infirm, along with the elderly, the young, women and children, and those racked by hunger who were unable to walk to distant areas, went into the cities to live by begging. Many villages and hamlets were emptied of people as a result. They started to beg in the cities to survive but when they were given money they were unable to buy bread, for there was none. Instead, they would 'buy a turnip, cabbage, or mallow and eat it raw'. A vegetable shortage developed as a consequence. Some people then even dared to enter churches and eat the communion bread, while others 'cut off the inedible bits from dead carcasses and boiled and ate them'. By the following year, those in the villages were 'eating vetches, and others were roasting and eating shrivelled grapes', while those in the city roamed the streets, 'picking out and eating the dung-spattered roots and leaves of vegetables'. They slept in the colonnades and streets, howling night and day from the pangs of hunger. Their bodies grew thin, they lost heart, and then they began to die. The onset of winter increased the mortality rate since they lived outside in the streets or under the colonnades. Everywhere, there were children and infants 'bleating in the streets', some of whose mothers had died, others of whom had been abandoned when they had asked their mothers for something to eat but the mothers, having nothing to give, had fled.⁸

In short, the starving did not passively accept their fate; instead they took great pains to try to improve their situation. Bartering, begging and scavenging were all part of the poor's armoury of economic self-defence. The extent to which these represent creative approaches to disaster relief is unclear. It is tempting to see their efforts as a desperate search for new survival strategies. However, people were obviously falling back on a tried-and-tested repertoire of actions which had a proven track-record of delivering some modest success previously. In this way, people can be seen as turning to the past for help. They looked to a common store of knowledge, a communal survival kit in the face of disaster, to provide them with the possible answers to their suffering.

If self-help failed, the poor looked to society's better-off for assistance. In fact, charitable giving from the wealthier was the norm during periods of food shortage and such patronage provided an additional

form of social disaster insurance.⁹ After the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenae, ‘the great houses were thrown open’ and dressings and doctors were supplied to all comers.¹⁰ Even significant disasters could be relieved by these means. When Laodicea, one of the most famous Asiatic cities, was left ruined by an earthquake, it ‘recovered by its own resources’, without any assistance from its Roman governors.¹¹ Local bigwigs would be expected to make the most of their connections to arrange access to whatever extra resources could be found. This is how problems got fixed in the Roman world. Whereas disasters nowadays require technology and expertise to sort them out, in antiquity it took social status and prestige. It is worth emphasizing that the social expectation of aid seemed to work. The stimulus of social observers at all levels of society encouraged, cajoled and compelled people to act to help their fellow citizens. The variability of the Mediterranean climate ensured that there were plenty of opportunities for this formalized response to be given. The fact that food crises were common but famines rare shows that these social mechanisms were probably fairly effective in alleviating want.¹²

That is not to say that the local elite could always fix things. In some towns the situation was so bad that collective abandonment became the only viable option. The city of Baelo Claudia, now Cádiz, in southern Spain, experienced two major episodes of abrupt destruction, occurring sometime between 40–60 CE and 350–95. The ruins show ample evidence of column collapse, distortion and failure, the collapse of house and city walls, as well as the street pavements warping and twisting. After the second destruction, the inhabitants simply gave up and left.¹³ Similarly, Pausanias records that the people of Myus left their city on account of a natural development. A small inlet of the sea used to run into their land, into which flowed a river. The river silted up the entrance to the inlet with mud, thereby turning it into a lake. When the water became fresh, since it was now cut off from the sea, vast swarms of gnats bred in the lake until the inhabitants could take it no more and were forced to leave the city. They departed for Miletus, taking with them the images of the gods and their other movable goods.¹⁴

But such failures were the exception. Disasters generally gave the elite significant opportunities for self-aggrandizement and display. Public benefaction allowed them to enhance their status and reputation by giving people what they needed at a time when it was going to have the maximum impact. Each denarius spent alleviating great distress would be far more likely to be remembered than just another set of games staged when the times were good. This can be seen in the many

honorific inscriptions that mention the generosity of local officials or private individuals during food shortages when they provided subsidized grain to ordinary people. Such gift-giving was, of course, also competitive. It represented a means for members of the elite to establish an identity as a community leader during a time of crisis, thereby marking them off from their local political and social rivals. Nor did the elite fail to take unfair advantage of the opportunities which disasters could offer them. The wealthy had a monopoly on philanthropy, which, like any such arrangement, can be abused. A frequent accusation against such individuals was that they were profiteering from shortage by hoarding grain supplies to help drive up the price, thereby allowing them to profit handsomely even if they later provided grain at a reduced price.

These acts functioned as conservative impulses by the existing power structure to restore the system after a disaster had threatened to destabilize it. Philanthropy served to legitimize the social inequality which was the normal state of affairs in Roman society. The elite acted because they had to act in order to help maintain this system of inequality. Otherwise people might have questioned their leaders' right to rule. But there were strict limits to the compassion of the rich. During the famine described above by Eusebius, the wealthy were amazed at the multitude of beggars and, 'after giving countless doles, henceforth adopted a hard and pitiless frame of mind'. Charity was fine, but not if it was going to threaten to overwhelm the very wealth differential which allowed it to exist in the first place.

The response of the Roman government can also be interpreted in this light. The state's primary concern in any disaster was to ensure that temporary disorder did not feed through into any wider social change. In many ways the response of Roman authorities to disasters reveals both a lack of innovation and an institutional rigidity. As Garnsey has noted, it is significant that there is no close correlation between the occurrence of food shortages and the government's development of the supply and distribution system. Those who handed out corn doles to the urban poor, therefore, were not moved primarily by sympathy for their nutritional plight.¹⁵ In general, it can be said that there were few long-term preventative measures, and such governmental response as did happen was mainly reactive to events. But that is not to say that Roman authorities did not provide any assistance during times of crisis.

Prior to the first emperor Augustus, disaster response depended on the generosity of individual elite members. With the advent of the 'Father of the State', as one of his titles held him to be, Augustus acquired an

express duty to help the members of his new wider household when they faced extreme difficulties. In response to a food shortage in 6–7 CE in Rome, he introduced a raft of short-term, emergency measures designed to alleviate the situation. These included the temporary expulsion to 100 miles of gladiators and unsold slaves and all foreigners except doctors and teachers; the dismissal of the emperor's and officials' retainues; permission for senators to leave Rome with their retainues; the recess of the courts; the appointment of senators in charge of the grain and bread supply; grain rationing; cutbacks in expensive feasts; and an increase in the grain handout given to Roman citizens.¹⁶ Augustus also tried to counter the ever-present risk of fire in the city by introducing a range of initiatives, among them the setting up of a group of full-time fire-fighters with specialized equipment. This shows that the notion of prevention was not entirely absent in the Roman government's approach to disaster.

Disaster prevention was, however, poorly developed in antiquity. Augustus, for example, tried hard to stop the Tiber flooding. He had the river bed dredged clear of rubbish, while widening it by demolishing buildings directly on the riverside. He also established a commission for the protection of the Tiber bank. After yet another flood in 15 CE, it was proposed to reduce the Tiber's catchment area by diverting one of its tributaries. The proposal was, however, rejected on the grounds that it risked causing flooding elsewhere.¹⁷ Augustus' successor Tiberius also tried to introduce measures to control the Tiber's flood waters but these failed in the face of opposition from nearby cities. Claudius built a canal as part of his development of the port of Ostia, with the aim of improving the drainage of flood waters. Trajan also cut a canal as part of his restructuring of the mouth of the Tiber.¹⁸ But despite all these attempts, Rome still faced regular inundations from the river which flowed through it.¹⁹

Perhaps the greatest long-term impact of Augustus' attempts at disaster management was to establish a template against which later emperors would be measured. Imperial intervention during disasters became one of the expectations that people had of government. The reclusive Tiberius, therefore, felt obliged to leave his island retreat at Capri when the collapse at Fidenae killed thousands.²⁰ And the range of actions which subsequent emperors took to alleviate disastrous situations expanded significantly. During a financial crisis, Tiberius lent 100 million sesterces without interest for three years.²¹ Losses through fire were sometimes made good by the imperial treasury.²² Such assistance could be in the form of cash, a tax rebate, the cancellation of debts, or acts such as the advancement of civic status. One law says that in the aftermath of a fire, any Latin worth 200,000

sesterces who spent half that sum in building in Rome would obtain full Roman citizenship.²³ Dio claims that too many cities to record were helped by Augustus and senators after they had suffered earthquake damage.²⁴ Tax relief was given to cities for five years following an earthquake in Asia, help which was weighted according to the severity of impact, and was administered under the oversight of a senior official.²⁵ During food shortages it was common for emperors to order the release of private stocks of wheat to improve supplies. Indeed by the time of the late empire when the bubonic plague struck, it was, according to Procopius, customary for the emperor to make provisions for the burial of the excessive quantities of dead bodies that were clogging up the streets.²⁶ The emperor Justinian even went so far as to undertake significant civil engineering works to reduce the threat of a recurrence after a flood had killed a third of the population of the city of Edessa. Having restored all the ruined parts of the city, and also having made effective promises that such a calamity should not occur again, he cut a new channel for the river in front of the city's circuit wall, changing the course of the river as a result.²⁷

Such an expansion in imperial provision was neither automatic nor linear. Whether help was given or not often depended upon the whim of the personality involved. When Nero, for example, visited an earthquake-stricken town, he simply recommended that all the residents abandon the place. Emperors also had an eye to generating cost-savings. Nero, again, at one point suspended free grain handouts in order to reduce expenditure.²⁸ Severe disasters had the effect of reducing the imperial treasury's tax-take by depressing economic activity and killing off many tax-payers. In such a situation the government was not necessarily keen to incur additional costs. Above all, the emperors kept an eye open for any potential political fallout that might occur from seemingly harmless preventative measures they might take. Trajan famously refused Pliny permission to form a fire-brigade in Nicomedia after a disastrous fire, on the grounds that such a group would inevitably become politicized and lead to disturbance.²⁹ What is also significant in this exchange of letters is that it shows the degree to which emperors and their provincial governors were now getting involved in the minutiae of local administration. The provision of disaster relief had become a matter of imperial interest.

Imperial assistance was not granted solely according to need. Emperors were influenced by public opinion and sought to carry out certain symbolic acts of assistance which would generate goodwill among the populace. Perhaps the most obvious and commonplace of these acts was the provision of extra resources to treat the dead

properly. During the great plague, when the collectors had themselves died, and the city stank with the corpses that were piled up in the streets, Justinian donated money and zealous men to dig pits.³⁰ Similarly, when a plague struck under Marcus Aurelius, thousands were carried off by the pestilence, ‘including many nobles’, but such was his kindness of heart that ‘he had funeral ceremonies performed for the lower orders even at the public expense’.³¹ Communal perceptions of disaster relief therefore influenced the responses of government. The emperors made sure that they were seen to be sharing the pain of their subjects. When Justinian learned about the destruction of Edessa in flood waters, ‘he took off his tiara in deep sorrow’. Sorrow indeed. In fact, he went so far as to lay aside his purple and sit in mourning. Being seen to meet public expectations of the display of grief remains important – think only of the controversy of the queen’s flag at Buckingham Palace that did not fly at half mast after the death of Princess Diana – and for those not directly affected by the disaster are an important way of being reassured that their government has the interests of its citizens at heart. So when the emperor Titus saw Rome burning in yet another conflagration, he made no remark except ‘I am ruined’, implying that it was as much his own personal loss.³² Indeed, during the several disasters that afflicted his brief reign, including the eruption of Vesuvius and a plague, we are told that Titus showed ‘not merely the concern of an emperor, but even a father’s surpassing love’. During the plague, he left no stone unturned in his efforts to improve the situation of his suffering people: ‘there was no aid, human or divine, which he did not employ, searching for every kind of sacrifice and all kinds of medicines’.

The actions of emperors could both remedy and intensify the effects of catastrophe. Following the Great Fire in Rome, Nero provided food and shelter to those left homeless, and had the streets broadened and straightened so that a repeat of the disaster might be less likely.³³ He also provided bonuses for the timely completion of rebuilding work. But such decisions had unintended consequences. Wider avenues lined with detached houses might seem superficially appealing, but such generous space provision merely created overcrowding elsewhere. Shortage of suitable property will have driven up rents for those least able to afford them. Clearing away the crammed little lanes of old Rome will also have destroyed social networks among the poor. The rapid flow of capital towards the attractive returns offered by the emperor’s scheme will have driven up the cost of borrowing elsewhere in the economy. Similarly, when a governor of Edessa in the late empire tried to alleviate the distress of the starving during a famine by handing out free bread and putting down straw and matting in the

porticoes and baths for them to sleep on at night, this simply had the effect of swelling the numbers of destitute in the town: 'for word had spread through the region around the city that the Edessenes looked after those in need, and an immeasurable mass of humanity therefore came into the city'.³⁴ Well-meaning emperors could even generate a crisis by means of their actions. When Julian arrived in Antioch prior to his ill-fated expedition against Persia in 363 CE, he tried to win over the populace, who were understandably less than happy about having an army wintering in their midst, by issuing an edict to force down the cost of everyday commodities. With an army there, however, these commodities soon became scarcer than normal and, unable to raise prices legally, traders refused to sell their goods at artificially depressed levels. The result was that supplies failed. The inhabitants of the city were so angry that they cursed the emperor and ridiculed his beard, which was a very long one, by saying that it ought to be cut off and manufactured into ropes.³⁵

It should come as no surprise that an emperor might make a bad situation worse. Neither skill nor experience were criteria for holding the office, so a ruler's ability to respond adequately to disasters was often limited by personal failings. Decision-making under stress is often poor at the best of times, and there is no evidence that the Romans learned from their mistakes in crisis management. Above all, we should not assume that the emperors were concerned about the disasters that affected provincial cities. Augustus, who took a keen interest in the afflictions of Rome, did also take remedial action to help stricken places in far-flung regions of the empire. Once, for example, the city of Tralles in the province of Asia was devastated by an earthquake. A local farmer, called Chaeremon, was so moved by the calamity that he set off to find the emperor and ask for his help. He journeyed not just to Rome but to eastern Spain, where Augustus happened to be campaigning at that time. Augustus was so touched that he designated two of Rome's noblest and most distinguished ex-consuls to go there, and they spent a fortune on rebuilding it.³⁶ But the very fact that this story was thought worthy of the telling, and therefore survived, tells us that this was not how emperors normally acted. For the most part, they would probably never even have heard of such events, since they would have been inaccessible. Even if another Chaeremon could be found to travel to the imperial court there is no certainty he would have received a hearing or that the emperor would have acted with the same generosity that Augustus had shown. Such randomness was one of the defining features of imperial autocratic rule, in that it depended on the whim of individuals whose personal eccentricities were often magnified by the

pressures of the job.

Disasters created a threat to the social order which sometimes required the state to reassert its political strength. The maintenance of order was a leading aim of the central authorities in Rome and anything which posed a challenge to that was something that needed to be watched closely. We should not imagine, though, that most people necessarily agreed with this. What the ordinary people wanted from their rulers in a crisis was help. Patronage, as we have seen, was viewed as the key to solving crises. Such patronage established a reciprocal relationship between the weak and their leadership which placed them under some obligation to respond in any future disaster. Nor did the ways in which the people responded to disasters always accord with their rulers' wishes. Leaving town and migrating to a less affected area posed a direct challenge to the ability of local elites to solve the crisis. We have seen that there was no uniform popular response to disaster, but protests and public disorder show that differing perceptions did exist between the people and the authorities about what action was required. Disasters placed an enormous burden on the normally cosy patronage relationship and was capable of activating deep-seated animosities between the people and local elites. During food shortages, therefore, crowds often attacked officials, whom they blamed for either causing or failing to alleviate the situation. During a severe food shortage in Rome in 6 CE, the masses were so distressed by the famine, their tax burden and the losses they had sustained in a recent fire that they became restless. They 'not only openly discussed numerous plans for a revolution, but also posted at night even more numerous bulletins'. The authorities responded by offering rewards for information about the ringleaders of this movement. Information duly began to flow in but this 'also contributed to the commotion in the city'. The tension continued until the grain ships finally arrived and gladiatorial games were given to persuade the population that life had returned to its more comfortable normality.³⁷ To such lengths were officials prepared to go to protect the social hierarchy and their place in it.

In Roman society the majority of people were structurally exposed to the dangers of disasters. Occasional patronage and palliative offerings such as games enabled the elite to define themselves as paternalistic and generous, and to reaffirm the claim to justice of the existing social order. Riots showed that people did not always agree with their leaders. Disasters were capable of generating a leadership crisis in that they exposed the inability of the existing government to deliver on its claims for a harmonious and prosperous society. Legal response to disasters also reveals conflicts within Roman society about appropriate

behaviour during disasters. A law of Justinian tries to stamp out the usury which was taking place during food crises. Referring to this as 'an evil greater than excessive impiety and avarice', the law describes how some people would lend a small amount of seed to farmers, who in their desperation for food would agree to excessively high interest rates, and then, falling behind with their repayments, would lose possession of their land which they had used as collateral for the loan.³⁸ Disasters could also reveal disagreement within the leadership itself. Under public pressure to act and being seen clearly to be failing to deliver, many of the ruling elite reacted by trying to pass the blame onto someone else. Disasters often generated a vigorous blame culture, which sought to divert the attention of its victims on to other scapegoats. Nero famously had Christians thrown to the beasts and burned as street-lighting after the Great Fire in Rome. Targeting religious extremists who were so whacky as to believe that the world would end in a great apocalypse of fire and brimstone made obvious sense to an emperor in need of a culprit. By picking on the Christians, Nero was able to provide a focus for communal anger that fitted neatly with many people's pre-existing prejudices.

But blame worked both ways. People were able to counter with stories that Nero himself had been responsible for the disaster, a theory which probably tapped into widespread concerns about some of the emperor's more erratic behaviour. Blame was a way for people to discredit rulers morally and thereby attack their very right to rule.³⁹ Constructing blame, therefore, can be seen as a way for different social groups, who have been affected differently by a disaster, to express their well-established social antagonisms. So we find that in the mid-third century, when the emperor Gallus refused to help the people of Antioch when famine threatened, instead, 'to the multitude, which was in fear of the direst necessity, he delivered up Theophilus, consular governor of Syria', constantly repeating the statement that 'no one could lack food if the governor did not wish it'. These words 'increased the audacity of the lowest classes', and when lack of provisions became more acute, driven by hunger and rage, as if the governor had been delivered into their hands by an imperial edict, 'they assailed him with kicks and blows, and trampling him under foot when he was half-dead, with awful mutilation tore him to pieces'.⁴⁰ Faced with an angry mob like this, an official's only hope was to try and restore some common ground between them. When Tertullus, a fourth-century ce prefect of Rome, was assailed by the violent threats of the common people because they thought that famine, 'the worst of all ills', was coming as a result of a failure in supplies, he resorted to offering his two young sons to the 'wildly riotous populace', tearfully

saying, 'behold your fellow citizens who will endure the same fate as you, unless our luck changes'. His desperate strategy worked: 'through pity at this sight, the mob, of their own nature inclined to mercy, was appeased and held its peace, awaiting their impending fate with resignation'. And to show that the gods approved of his actions, the seas calmed when Tertullus was sacrificing in the temple of Castor and Pollux at Ostia and the grain ships safely arrived.⁴¹

The effects of disasters were not wholly negative. Disasters provided an opportunity for social networks to help and be reaffirmed, not only between rich and poor but also between social equals. Such relationships gave Roman society considerable flexibility in the face of the stress created by a disaster. Disasters could act as a catalyst for change, with events like the Great Fire turning Rome into a *tabula rasa* for redevelopment. Increased mortality and migration had the silver lining of opening up opportunities for those left behind and may have allowed some greater upward social mobility. An increase in the number of widows and orphans will have had two opposing effects: if they had received a generous inheritance from their dead spouse or parents, this provided opportunities for some to marry into wealth; if they were left penniless, then downward social mobility would be the result, as they slid into destitution. It is unclear whether disasters had any long-term economic impact. Disasters in pre-industrial societies tend to affect labour significantly but capital minimally.⁴² This labour-destroying bias of disasters saw the available workforce diminish. This in turn may have made labour more expensive, but lowered rents, since there was a smaller population seeking housing. A smaller number of mouths to feed may also have lowered the cost of grain. The effect of major disasters, such as the Justinianic plague of 541 CE, may therefore have been generally positive for those labourers who were lucky enough to survive. John of Ephesus complains of the 'scandalous profits' being made by those carrying away the dead and the high cost of laundry in 544 CE. Indeed the cost of having clothes washed rose so sharply that even court dress was much simplified as a result. The rich also responded by complaining about the cost and difficulty of getting servants, a situation which reflected what was a *de facto* narrowing of the economic gap between the haves and the have-nots.

It is likely that many individual Romans benefited both economically and socially from the deaths of their fellow citizens. Disasters also gave communities the chance to improve their lot. In 224 BCE, the inhabitants of Rhodes availed themselves of the pretext of an earthquake which had occurred a short time previously and which had caused their great Colossus, one of the wonders of the world, to

collapse. Instead of sitting numbed with shock, they 'made such sound practical use of the incident that the disaster was a cause of improvement to them rather than of damage'. They hammed up the greatness of the calamity and how dreadful it had been, and by conducting themselves with great seriousness and dignity they had such an effect on other cities and especially kings that not only did they receive the most lavish gifts, but 'all the donors themselves felt that a favour was being conferred on them by being allowed to help'. They received seventy-five silver talents to supply oil in the gymnasium as well as silver cauldrons and water-pitchers; ten talents for sacrifice and ten more to qualify new men for citizenship. Rhodian ships were relieved of customs payments and they were given fifty catapults. Above all they were given a huge quantity of money, goods and craftsmen for redevelopment, as well as timber and sail cloth for building ships.⁴³

But for most, disasters were unequivocally bad and it was to religion that they turned to help them deal with such dreadful happenings. Disasters were generally seen as being primarily theological events. Given this, it is not surprising that a frequent reaction to the shock of disaster was to hurl oneself on the mercy of the gods, by seeking sanctuary in a temple. But the fact that the gods were seen as persuadable had the comforting effect of emphasizing that events could be altered by means of changing the gods' minds.⁴⁴ This opened the door to a whole range of more active responses designed to try and change divine views and behaviour. In order to achieve such an end, the first imperative was to establish a line of communication between the human and the divine. Prayers, observances and rituals all sought to place the supplicant victim firmly in the gods' view. The very fact of disaster was proof of the gods' displeasure and demanded that attempts be made to placate them. These could take the form of sacrifices, offerings or public prayers. Establishing the cause of the gods' ill-will was vital and could be ascertained through consultations with oracles and sacred books. Under the emperor Gallus, for example, the many calamities of war were accompanied by a terrible earthquake, in which many men died of fright, so 'the favour of the gods was sought by consulting the Sibylline books, and, according to their command, sacrifices were made to Jupiter Salutaris'.⁴⁵ Revered texts such as these provided an independent authority and access to divine knowledge that could offer guidance as to which actions would be appropriate to win over the gods. Other more physical attempts at making the gods happy included ritual processions through the main urban spaces and fasting.

Disasters, therefore, provided an opportunity for traditional religious

mores to be reasserted as a way of removing the cause of the gods' anger. Romans often assumed that disasters were caused by the aberrant religious beliefs of minority groups, which had proved offensive to the gods. Christians had frequently to rebut accusations that they had caused disasters of various kinds, such as the Great Fire in Rome, or the pestilence of 250–70 CE, by refusing to partake in the state cult. Such a communal response emphasizes that disasters tended to have the effect of bringing people closer together, albeit temporarily. It is interesting to note that in the Greek Magical Papyri – a great collection of Egyptian spells and curses that survives from the imperial period – there are no spells that deal directly with trying to ward off potential disasters (there are only some relating to various personal illnesses and concerns, some of which could be the result of famine, for example, but are not explicitly stated as such). This suggests that disasters did not impinge on people's everyday existence; they were small risks that were simply not worth magicking against. Or that disasters, as something which affected the whole community, were not part of the competitive struggle between individuals that characterized much of Roman magic. Or that they were events of such magnitude that no individual spell could hope to act against them, requiring instead a communal religious effort to overcome the gods' animus.



The household shrine from the house of Caecilius in Pompeii shows the effects of the earthquake of 62 CE and the sacrifices carried out to placate the gods.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Individuals were able to profit, though, from the strength of communal religious feeling following a disaster. When an earthquake hit the cities on the left bank of the Hellespont, some Egyptians and Chaldeans went on the scrounge, promising to make sacrifices worth ten talents to Earth and Poseidon. The cities were so overcome with fear that contributions flowed in both from common funds and from individual households. But the scroungers then refused to sacrifice for them unless the money was deposited in the banks, presumably because they were aware of how quickly fear can subside in the aftermath of a disaster. The cities were saved from this religious extortion when the wonder-working Apollonius of Tyana drove the scroungers out of the cities ‘for making a fortune from the misfortunes of others’, and instead averted further disasters for only a small cost.⁴⁶ But we should not assume that panic made people blind to the practical inconveniences that attempts to ward off disasters could generate. Livy records that in 193 BCE, there was such a sequence of tremors and minor earthquakes that people grew tired, not only of the tremors themselves, but of the various ceremonies that were prescribed to stop them: ‘for the senate could not be convened nor public business transacted, since the consuls were busy with sacrifices and rites of expiation’. In the end, the Sibylline books were consulted;

they called for a three-day period of prayer, during which men with garlands on their heads made supplications to all the gods. A decree was also published that all families should offer their prayers collectively and, most importantly of all for the life of the city to go on, that no one should report another earthquake on a day when there had already been one.⁴⁷

Christian responses to disaster shared several characteristics with pagan religious practice. There was the same emphasis on ritual attempts to appease God's anger. John of Ephesus describes how, when in 529–30 CE the river Euphrates was blocked by a landslide, the people from the many villages in the area gathered for numerous prayers and rituals, and holding crosses, they marched in processions in sorrow, tearfulness and great fear, waving their censers and burning incense. They then offered the Eucharist above the obstructing landslide in the middle of the river, which caused the river to overcome its blockage and surge through with such force that it flooded vast tracts of the eastern regions. But Christianity also sought to advance the apotropaic claims of martyr relics and saints. In the 470s, after an earthquake in the Rhone valley, the bishop of Vienne instituted rogations for which the faithful prepared by fasting for three days, before parading icons, singing psalms and praying for deliverance, in what Brown calls 'great intercessory processions and solemn junkets'.⁴⁸

Christians took great pains to emphasize that they alone gave practical evidence of their sympathy and humanity.⁴⁹ Eusebius records how during a famine, 'all day long some of them would diligently persevere in performing the last offices for the dying and burying them'. Others would gather together the great crowd of those who were starving in the city at that time, and distribute bread to them all, 'so that their action was on all men's lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians'. During a great famine in Edessa, it was the Christians, rather than the local rich, who helped the sufferers by dividing up the porticoes, and placing in them about three hundred beds, where they cared for the famished. The dead they buried, and they cared for those who had hope of life.⁵⁰ Likewise, the account of the life of St John the Almsgiver describes how during a severe famine, the holy man's stewards were 'ceaselessly distributing money or some small gifts to the needy'. Some of the destitute women had only recently given birth, but were so overcome with hunger that they had to rush to get help from the distributors while they were still in the grip of abdominal pains. They were 'deadly pale, and suffering grievously'. John responded to their plight by building seven lying-in hospitals in different parts of the city so that each woman would get a

week's rest, before being given some money and sent home.⁵¹

Christian leaders also liked to play a hands-on role in helping deal with the effects of disasters. In John of Ephesus, we find them not only boosting morale but even assisting in building fortifications. When Antioch was destroyed in an earthquake in 528 (which he dates incorrectly as occurring in 539–40), a faithful man received an order in a dream to tell those who survived to write on the doors of the buildings, houses and shops that were spared and did not fall, 'Christ is with you'. Here was a religion that could even support wobbling structures. During an earlier famine, Joshua the Stylite recounts that the bishop intervened politically by going to the emperor and urging him to waive the land and capitation taxes. While this was not wholly successful – the emperor awarded a very modest tax remission to the villages and released them from the duty to draw water for Roman soldiers – we are presented with a religious leadership who took an active part in dealing with the practical consequences of disaster.⁵² Above all, Christians dealt with the dead properly, concerned to take care of the bodies that would soon be resurrected. John describes how the whole city was careful to accompany the bodies taken from the hospital, 'with psalms, praises, hymns, and songs full of the hope of resurrection'. Women also took part with mournful lamentations and emotional cries. At their head went the bishop, Mar Peter. And when all the Christian graveyards were full up, they opened up old ones, then even resorted to reusing pagan burial grounds. This was a religion that knew how to honour its dead.⁵³

Yet we should be careful not to take these hagiographical accounts at face value. Disasters created opportunities for competing Christian groups to score points against one another. During the Arian controversy of the fourth century, there was fierce inter-Christian rivalry between groups who favoured alternative explanations of the nature of the Trinity. One of the Arians, who believed that God was superior to Jesus and the Holy Ghost, managed to depose Cyril, the orthodox bishop of Jerusalem, who believed that the three parts of the Trinity were one and the same, by discovering that Cyril had sold sacred ornaments during a famine to buy food for the starving. Someone recognized some jewellery which he had presented to Cyril being worn by an actress on stage and found out that a merchant had sold it to the actress, and that the bishop had sold it to the merchant. This provided the pretext for the Arians to have Cyril removed from his post.⁵⁴

Perhaps what characterized the Christian response to disaster above all was its reliance on miraculous help. Sometimes this help was

delivered through the use of relics. When, for example, Theodore of Sykeon was struck down by the bubonic plague as a boy, his family took him to the shrine of St John the Baptist near the village where they lived and laid him at the entrance to the sanctuary. Above him hung an icon of Jesus Christ. While he lay there suffering in great torment from the swellings of the plague, drops of dew suddenly fell upon him from the icon. Immediately, he recovered and returned to his home.⁵⁵ But such miracle cures were primarily brought about by means of the acts of individual holy men. The range of problems a wonder-worker like Theodore was called upon to fix was considerable. We find a mother afraid that her son might be devoured by some beast, since a fierce wolf had lately been carrying off children in the neighbourhood. We find the village of Skoudris hit by a heavy hailstorm and flood which destroyed both the houses and the crops, carrying off people and even babies in their cradles. We find other villages afflicted by plagues of insects and animals. Wherever anything of this kind occurred, we are told that 'the people at once ran to the saint and either took him back with them or carried away water blessed by his hand'.⁵⁶ The holy man responded by undertaking a series of ritual actions designed to channel the power of God through his body into generating a solution to the problem. When a large swarm of locusts appeared in the village of Mazamia and covered the district like a cloud, devouring the summer crops and the fruit of the vineyards, the people went to the saint and threw themselves at his feet, beseeching him to deliver them from this affliction. Theodore responded by leading a religious procession to the plain, where he 'ordered the villagers to stand in a certain place and pray to the Lord for mercy. He himself took three locusts in his hand and stood praying to the Lord about them. And whilst he prayed, the three locusts died in his hand.' They then recited holy liturgy, before returning to the church. Next day they found all the locusts dead.⁵⁷ Likewise, when many of the inhabitants of the village of Telneshe started to die from severe tumours, they all went to Simeon Stylites, a holy man who occupied a pillar for decades, and begged him to intercede on their behalf. As he stood in prayer, a certain stone Eucharistic chalice was placed before him. The assembled crowd stood and petitioned and prayed and suddenly the cup was filled with water. The people all ran and rubbed themselves with the water, and immediately they were cured of the tumours.⁵⁸

Holy men's ability to bring relief to potentially disastrous situations was one of their main selling points. What was the point of a man of extreme holiness if he could not bring about some practical assistance as a sure sign of his being a conduit through which God's power could

flow? The fact that this power gave holy men the capacity to control nature made them particularly useful in the context of the regular occurrence of natural disasters. They themselves were immune to the dire effects of disasters. In this way, they can be seen as symbolizing what the average person dreamed of being: free from the ever-present threat of danger, they stood outside the culture of risk that enveloped everyone else. And at times of great distress, holy men satisfied the people's need for strong and effective leadership when their own secular authorities were largely indifferent to their fate. It should be remembered that disaster-fixing holy men were not purely a Christian phenomenon. Apollonius of Tyana, for example, was a pagan miracle-worker who claimed to prevent earthquakes by means of sacrifices.⁵⁹ But holy men seemed to characterize the practical benefits that were one of the mainstays of Christian popular appeal.

The control that these holy men could exercise over the ordinary people is represented as being near total. When a dry spring in the vicinity of the village of Ganadris caused the crops to wither and fail, the local people were forced to go to Simeon Stylites and confess that even though the saint had issued an order that no one should work until evening on the first day of the week, one of them had 'dared to go irrigate on the first day of the week, at dawn, and when they saw it, instead of stopping him or hindering him ... they all scattered, went out and left the church, and each one of them went to his own quarter to irrigate'. On the next day the fountain had run dry. Simeon was exceedingly enraged at them and scolded them severely, before having them violently driven away. For three days they lay prostrate nearby, begging everyone to try and persuade the saint to change his mind. Eventually, the village elders managed to persuade him and, on his command, they carried out certain rituals, including throwing crosses into the fountains and keeping vigil in church, and soon after the springs flowed freely again.⁶⁰

Holy men had access to the secular authorities. There are frequent examples of their intervening with local elites to get private stocks released during famines. Even emperors sometimes turned to holy men for help in extreme situations. After a great fire in Constantinople, Daniel the Stylite was asked by the emperor to pray to God on his behalf because he was so terrified that the disaster might recur.⁶¹ Mainstream religious sources were also keen to emphasize that these free-spirited religious heroes used their power to help the institution of the church as well. So during a severe famine, when Theodore prayed for food to be supplied to the nearby monastery and told the monks to put the wheat they did have on a dish under the altar: 'This was done and on the morrow some true lovers of Christ

from a great distance came and brought him thirty large measures of wheat.' Likewise, after Theodore had prevented further hailstorm damage in Apoukournis, the grateful villagers presented a vineyard to the monastery, or so the story ran.⁶²

Whether it was through religious means such as these or with the help of secular authorities and local benefactors, Roman society possessed a range of options to help it deal with the shock and impact of disaster. Recovery necessitated communal involvement, which itself presented an opportunity for pre-existing holes in the social fabric to be patched over and for traditional moral values to be reasserted. On occasions, recovery called for new rituals of thanksgiving and remembrance. After the plague of 174 BCE, for example, when the disease had dragged on for months, the senate decreed that the Sibylline books should be consulted, which in turn decreed that a day of prayer was observed and, as the prayers were publicly pronounced, the people, assembled in the forum, undertook a vow that if the plague left Roman territory they would celebrate a festival of thanksgiving for two days.⁶³ The public nature of such ceremonies reflected the fact that disasters such as fires, sieges and earthquakes often destroyed places that were essential to communal life and, as such, constituted an essential part of Roman identity.

The Roman authorities did not learn from their mistakes when it came to dealing with the effects of disasters. But what we count as their mistakes – not treating everyone equally, not rushing to help the general populace when it was afflicted by calamity, not taking adequate preventative measures – were not seen by them as errors. It is possible that for many this resulted in a lack of faith in their governing institutions and in increased levels of anxiety about disasters recurring. But this was a culture characterized by respect for tradition and hierarchy, and any events which destabilized those social bases were viewed, particularly by those in the elite, with great suspicion. In the disaster context, therefore, tradition and the potential for disorder coexisted in tension. Whereas in the modern world, disasters can often act as catalysts for change, in the Roman world, extreme situations often represented an opportunity for the benefits of traditional patronage relationships to be forcefully reasserted. Dealing with disasters had, however, always provided opportunities for new patrons to emerge, and Christianity took great pains to use catastrophic situations as a way of putting the advantages of its new style of disaster relief clearly on public display.

Thinking about Disaster

It is now known that shifts in tectonic plates in the earth's crust cause earthquakes, which when they happen in or near the sea can also result in tsunamis; that the swelling up of magma leads to volcanic eruptions; that bubonic plague was a disease carried by fleas on rats (although there are some that dispute this); and that a combination of inadequate institutions and sheer individual bloody-mindedness has historically made military conflicts flare up with depressing frequency. The Romans had very different ideas about what caused disasters. The aim of this chapter is to examine the explanations that were current in the Roman world. How the Romans interpreted such events can tell us a great deal about how they perceived their cultural environment. But we should not expect to find a simple consensus in Roman views. Various attitudes towards disaster existed, which were sometimes highly contradictory. Plague, for example, could be understood on many levels: as a medical event, an ontological misfortune or a sign of the gods' anger, or all of these together. Moreover, we shall see that explanations often competed with one another to gain an audience, and as such reflected ongoing conflicts within Roman society. This lack of coherence in Roman notions about the catastrophic does not, though, mean that they did not give thought to the meaning and significance of such happenings.

As with many ancient ideas about the causes of things, it seemed natural to ascribe to them a mythical origin. Augustine records a story from an earlier Roman writer, Varro, about why the city of Athens was given that name. Once upon a time, the Delphic oracle told the citizens to decide whether they should take their city's name from the god of the sea, Poseidon, or the goddess of wisdom and warfare, Athena, a contest commemorated on the frieze of the west pediment of the Parthenon. Indeed, the gods were so keen to win this honour that they tried to bribe the electorate with a salt-water spring and an olive tree respectively. The king at the time, Cecrops, summoned all the citizens together to take a vote, including the women, 'for at that time it was customary that the women also should have a part in public deliberations'. The voting split along gender lines. The men voted for Poseidon and the women for Athena. But since women outnumbered men by one, Athena won by a single vote. Poseidon was

outraged to have lost to a bunch of women and in his wrath he devastated the Athenians' lands with great floods of sea-water, 'for it is not difficult for demons to spread abroad any body of water that they choose'. Terrified, the Athenians set out immediately to try to appease his anger, and so they subjected their womenfolk to a triple punishment: they lost the right to vote, their children were prevented from bearing their mother's name, and they were not to be called Athenian.¹

That vengeful gods could cause floods did at least leave a part for human agency to play in the story. Other explanations saw disasters as being fated by the stars. In this view, particular conjunctions of the constellations were seen as particularly dangerous. One astrologer saw violent death indicated when Mars lay on the angles, aspecting the waxing moon from above with no planet having an influence: 'in human signs of the zodiac, death is inflicted by the sword, either by bandits, or in a fight, or in some display of power. In earth signs death occurs in desert places or in various kinds of natural catastrophes.'² Similarly, another astrologer, Dorotheus of Sidon, argued that 'if you find Saturn with the moon in one of the cardines, then, even if the newborn is the son of a king, this indicates his fall from fortune and property. If Mars aspects with this, it will be a disaster.' According to his analysis, the type of disaster depended on the specific planet which was exerting influence on human affairs: so if it was Venus, the disaster related to a fall in his reputation among women; if Jupiter, then the disaster was because of a man, a noble or the wrath of kings, or because of the action of the government or his city; if Saturn, the disaster stemmed from men, slaves and the worthless; and so on.³ We can smile at the technical language designed to inspire confidence in the person consulting the astrologer. But predicting the future was a profitable and competitive business in the Roman world and these were the kinds of attribute that were needed to win customers. So we find other kinds of interpretation adopting a similar tone to analyse the disasters that awaited some. The dream-interpreter Artemidorus argued that if in a dream the god of health, Asclepius, 'moves and approaches or goes into a house, it prophesies sickness and famine. For then especially do men need this god.'⁴



Mosaic of an astronomer. Many believed that disasters were fated by the alignment of the stars, from where the term ‘disaster’ comes.
Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

But Romans also had more prosaic explanations for the occurrence of calamitous events. After a substantial fire in Rome in 210 BCE was started in several places, the Romans did not turn to astrologers to help them find the cause. Instead they offered a reward for information. A slave called Manus – ‘the Hand’ – duly came forward blaming his master, who was arrested along with the other slaves. They tried to malign the evidence of Manus, but the slaves were tortured, as was usual Roman legal practice, and they all confessed to

the crime. The informer was rewarded with his freedom and 20,000 coins.⁵

Geological explanations for earthquakes and volcanoes existed, which saw these events as natural phenomena rather than as the result of actions of the gods. These mostly drew on Aristotle's analysis, which theorized that large underground caves lay beneath the earth's surface and were filled with a gas that sometimes caught fire, causing the earth to move or, if it escaped, great explosions of fire above.⁶ As the later Latin poem on Mount Etna described it, the earth is not solid but 'everywhere the ground has its long line of fissure, everywhere is cleft and hollowed deeply with secret holes'. It is like a living creature with veins that run through it, 'so the earth by its chasms draws in and distributes currents of air'.⁷ The story that opened this book, about the earthquake-trick played by the engineer Anthemius, was preserved by the writer Agathias because it was used as supporting evidence in a debate on the causes of earthquakes by those who agreed with Aristotle and 'explained the origin of earthquakes in terms of exhalations and smoky vapours'.⁸ Pliny the Elder argued that a kind of geological trepanning would act as a mechanism for earthquake prevention, by causing an outlet for the confined breath within the earth to escape.⁹ Of course, these were theories based on a combination of logic, intuition and experience, rather than any ability to investigate the earth's properties more systematically. But they did represent an attempt to find physical causes for events and were freed from the religious and the moral overtones of most explanations.

Medical opinions were similarly available as to what caused such afflictions as the plague. These tried to analyse disease in accordance with an overarching schema based on a combination of observation and theory. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus, when describing the causes of plague, gives the impression that there is a consensus of opinion regarding such things, which we have already found to be lacking for other types of disaster. 'Both philosophers and skilful physicians agree', he says, 'that excess of cold or of heat or of moisture or of drought all cause pestilences.' So those who dwell in marshy areas suffer from coughs and eye complaints, while those in hot regions are liable to fevers and inflammations; but since fire is the strongest element it is drought that is 'the quickest in killing'.¹⁰ Based on Greek humoral theory, which saw the body as having four distinct fluids, known as humours – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm – such explanations saw physical afflictions such as the plague as being somatically predetermined by imbalances between these fluids. If a body was placed in a certain environment then it would inevitably result in the appearance of certain conditions. Diseases such as the

plague, therefore, were seen as being caused not by an outside agent but from an internal predisposition of the individual body to react to its environment in certain ways.

Many of the educated elite adopted an overtly rational approach to thinking about disasters, which seems far removed from the views of astrologers and dream-interpreters. The lawyer Agathias considered that it was only human to be moved to pity by tragedies such as these, but ‘to declare oneself utterly baffled and astonished would be to betray one’s ignorance of past history and of the fact that this world of ours is by its very nature continually exposed to a variety of calamities and misfortunes’.¹¹ In a similar fashion, Seneca argued that even though earthquakes could be the most destructive of all natural disasters – even plague will only empty a city, not carry it away – people’s fear of being dragged down alive into a yawning chasm with their homes was irrational. All death is the same, he argued, and urged his fellow Romans not to listen to those who fled from Campania, the region around Vesuvius, after the earthquake there in 62 CE and who said they would never visit the district again. It is a mistake, he believes, to think that any part of the world is safe from the danger of an earthquake, for ‘all regions lie under the same laws’. Indeed, ‘fate travels in a circuit and returns to a place it has long passed by’. Earthquakes for Seneca, therefore, were part of a super-cycle of luck that could be expected to average out in the long term. Their occurrence was nothing to do with the gods: ‘it will help also to keep in mind that gods cause none of these things and that neither heaven nor earth is overturned by the wrath of divinities’. Instead, they have ‘causes of their own’. But most people according to Seneca cannot help but be driven to religion if there is any strange natural event, such as an eclipse of the sun or moon, or even if lightning splits apart a statue.¹²

Class difference was an important factor in the kind of explanation which Romans favoured. The wealthy, who could afford to be educated, favoured the theories of Greek philosophers and medics, however weakly these were grounded on what we would consider scientific fact or observation. The association of particular theories with different statuses meant that the rejection of an argument could have as much to do with social position as with logic. As the poem *Etna* says, ‘do not let yourself be deceived by the stupid rabble’s falsehood that the activity of the mountain caves flags through loss of power’. This theory is, it claims, the result of ‘lying rumour’. Instead, the truth is that there are always ‘workers at hand’, in the form of ‘swarming winds’, which are unseen cause enough to create blockages in the earth’s caverns.¹³

But members of the educated, literary elite could also share more fantastical opinions about the phenomena associated with disasters. We can get some sense of this and the different views in action at the same time in Dio's account of the after-effects of the eruption of Vesuvius. He reports as fact that immediately prior to the earthquake and eruption, numbers of huge men, 'quite surpassing any human stature', were seen on the mountain and in the surrounding country, and then in the cities, 'wandering over the earth day and night and also flitting through the air'. He says that some thought that the Giants were rising again in revolt (for at this time also many of their forms could be discerned in the smoke and, moreover, a sound as of trumpets was heard), while others believed that the whole universe was being resolved into chaos or fire. In their panic, they fled, regarding 'any place where they were not as safer than where they were'. A similar confusion occurred in Rome once the dust cloud had reached there. Since the people did not and could not imagine what had happened, they, like those close at hand, 'believed that the whole world was being turned upside down'.¹⁴

It was religious ideas which dominated most explanations of disaster. Disasters, for the most part, were seen as acts of gods, not as something which could be theorized away. But the divine was a plastic concept in the ancient world. There was no simple division between the human and the upper world, which meant that a whole range of more nebulous demonic powers could also be assigned the blame for generating disasters in the earthly sphere. Demons were hard to pin down, given that they could take on a range of appearances. Theodore of Sykeon, for example, was once told by a vision of St George in the middle of the night to go and pray in a nearby shrine. On his way there, in the darkness he saw demons 'in the semblance of wolves and other wild animals'. These were terrifying beasts, with gaping mouths that rushed upon him as if they were out to kill him, so that he would be so scared that he would give up on his mission. Needless to say, it was going to take more than a few gnashing demons to force a saint of Theodore's calibre off his course, and he fearlessly drove them away. But demons were also capable of causing great havoc. Theodore, again, was once asked to help the villagers of Buzaea, who had been afflicted by a band of demons whom they had unwittingly released from the ground. Wanting to build a bridge across the village river, and needing some more stone slabs to do so, they quarried some from a certain hill nearby, to which in retrospect it seemed clear that the devil had guided them. By digging up the ground, they released a host of unclean spirits, with dreadful results; 'some of them entered into

sundry men and women of the village and afflicted them savagely, others again brought illnesses upon the remaining inhabitants, while yet others hung about the roads and the neighbourhood and did injury to beasts and travellers'.¹⁵ This was the kind of small-scale, local disaster that represented a normal part of life for the vast majority of the Roman world who inhabited the small towns and villages of the countryside. Sudden and unexplained illness or a steady stream of misfortunes were to be expected from time to time. The fact that some communities were more afflicted by misfortune than others also seemed to underline its supernatural origin. These people had no idea of what caused these events and it seemed natural to ascribe them to some kind of malevolent force at work in the world. Understanding their experience by literally demonizing the causes of bad events was a way for them to cope with the daily pressures which such an uncertain existence created.

Ignorance bred fear, which, unsurprisingly, drove many to religion and astrology. It was also natural for a society with no scientific explanation for disaster to blame themselves for the occurrence of many of these events. The consequence of this world-view was that the natural and the man-made were seen as interlinked processes. It was impossible to divide disasters into those which had occurred as a result of human agency and those which had been brought about by the divine. Natural and supernatural explanations of disaster therefore reinforced one another in a manner which had an understandable appeal. It explained the timing and the incidence in a way that fitted in with cosmological assumptions and notions of morality. It would have seemed unsurprising for people to suffer harm at the hands of nature, because nature was itself an expression of the relationship between the human and the divine. How people behaved and how the gods consequently felt towards mortals could itself be reflected in the physical actions of the world around them.

But it would be wrong to read this reaction as a passive resignation by the people to their fate. On the contrary, such thought represented a vigorous attempt to understand what was happening to their society and the environment in which they lived. Moreover, seeing disasters as an expression of the health of relations between men and their gods left the door wide open for actions to generate improvement. If the world was driven by divine force, however hard to fathom and seemingly random that power often was, the possibility of controlling and influencing it did still exist. It would also be a mistake to see turning towards religion as an expression of stupidity. The ancient world was profoundly religious and it was normal to look to supernatural phenomena to understand what was happening on earth.

But people did not automatically suspend any ability to see through fake religiosity just because they believed in the divine. The charlatan was an accepted part of the social landscape, to be aware of and guarded against. Critical faculties had to be applied to ensure that the correct approach was taken. In fourth-century CE Athens, the hierophant Nestorius, the chief priest of the Eleusinian mysteries, came forward to the magistrates saying that he had had a dream in which he was told to honour the hero Achilles with public sacrifices in order to save the city. Despite his high office they thought he was a senile old fool and took no notice of what he said. In the event, they were wrong to doubt his claims – Nestorius saved Athens from an earthquake that hit the rest of Greece by worshipping Achilles secretly – but the story shows that people were not easy to bamboozle.¹⁶

Disasters could be interpreted in a variety of ways. For the ancients, the occurrence of disasters posed great religious problems in that, as well as requiring some level of justification, they were held to reflect a disruption in the normal relationship between the natural and divine worlds. It therefore seemed sensible to interpret any strange phenomena as an omen or portent of divine will. The link between the natural and the divine meant that even regular features of the landscape such as a river could be seen as a ‘potentially dangerous divinity who demanded respect’.¹⁷ But the floods that angry river-gods could generate were but one of a long list of portents that disasters could represent.¹⁸ Often, these omens appeared in clusters, all relating back to the same underlying cause of divine ill-will. Livy records how prior to an outbreak of plague in 174 BCE, in the territory of Veii a boy with two heads had been born, and elsewhere a boy with only one hand, and a girl with teeth. In Campania, there was even ‘ample evidence that a cow had spoken’.¹⁹

The Romans, therefore, lived in a world that was full of messages from the gods about their future, which could be understood if only the correct means of interpretation were found. So Pliny the Elder noted that the earthquake is not a simple disaster, ‘nor does the danger consist only in the earthquake itself, but equally or more in the fact that it is a portent; the city of Rome was never shaken without this being a premonition of something about to happen’.²⁰ Similarly, when disaster threatened, such as when the waters of the Tiber rose, this was seen more as a ‘prophecy of warning’ and a ‘call to religion’ than simply as a potential disaster itself.²¹ Finding the correct interpretation was not an easy matter and often demanded specialist expertise. The dream-interpreter Artemidorus relates that dreaming of earthquakes had a range of meanings, which defied any simple interpretation by the lay person: ‘If the earth moves, it signifies that

the business affairs and the way of life of the dreamer will be changed', emphasizing the social disorder which disaster could generate. But crevasses, earthquakes and land-slides portend harm for all men and the destruction of themselves or their property. 'It has been observed that they are auspicious and beneficial only for those who have decided to go abroad or for those who are in debt. For once the earth has been split asunder or has collapsed, it no longer holds dreamers in the places where they previously were. Therefore they release a man from debts and imprisonment.'²²

In the religious context disasters were readily seen as divine punishments. The historian Tacitus, at the start of his *Histories*, noted that the long list of disasters suffered by the Romans in the period for which he was about to write the history were 'indubitable signs that the gods care not for our safety, but for our punishment'.²³ Ancient attitudes towards disaster, therefore, were often profoundly teleological, in that disasters were interpreted as manifestations of divine will that would lead ultimately to the execution of that will.²⁴ Sometimes, divine retribution could be straightforward. Procopius records a portent in Antioch during the reign of the emperor Anastasius (491–518 CE), when a violent wind suddenly uprooted some exceedingly tall, sacred cypresses, trees which the law forbade absolutely to be cut down. Accordingly, a little later, 'the place was visited by an extremely violent earthquake' which resulted in 300,000 perishing.²⁵ But often, the warnings were far more difficult to read or simply impossible to avoid. So during the great plague, Procopius notes that apparitions of supernatural beings in human guise of every description were seen by many persons, and those who saw them were immediately seized by the disease. At first, those who met these creatures tried to turn them aside by uttering holy names, or they would flee to sanctuaries, but to no avail. Later on, people would shut themselves in their homes and refuse to answer the door for fear it might be a demon knocking. Such were the scale and seeming randomness of this catastrophe, though, that most had neither visions nor dreams to forewarn them of their fate, but simply fell ill and died.²⁶ But for Procopius, the interpretation of this dreadful visitation was plain: disasters befell the emperor Justinian either because he himself was a demon incarnate or because God had 'turned away from the Roman empire' and left the stage to the demons to bring these things to pass.²⁷

If disasters were often interpreted as a sign of a rupture in the *pax deorum* – the mutually beneficial, reciprocal arrangement which the Romans felt they had with the gods – it was often political and social negligence that were seen as the underlying cause of that breakdown.

Earthquakes could be seen as a geophysical reflection of disharmony in the political sphere that was proving offensive to the gods. When Antioch had been thrown into political turmoil by the governor of Syria, which had divided the citizenry into two camps, an earthquake occurred during a meeting of the assembly. The people cowered and prayed for one another, which presented Apollonius of Tyana with a golden opportunity to deliver a warning to them that the earthquake was the result of their own discord.²⁸ Floods were often taken as portents of momentous political events, such as the death of an emperor.²⁹ Likewise, after a later eruption of Vesuvius in the early third century CE, 'it seemed probable that some change in the state was about to occur'; and, sure enough, there was 'an immediate change in the fortunes' of the emperor Septimius Severus' praetorian prefect, Plautianus.³⁰ Often disasters appeared to be a direct consequence of divine disagreement with a chosen course of political action. So when disease and famine afflicted the Romans in 22 BCE, the people 'believed that these woes had come upon them for no other reason than that they did not have Augustus for consul at this time'. Disasters also offered possibilities for political changes to be driven through in unusual ways. Accordingly, when the people wished to respond to their troubles by having Augustus appointed dictator, and the senate opposed this move, the people barricaded them in the senate house and forced them to vote the measure through by threatening to burn down the building around them.³¹ Similarly, a large-scale flood of the Tiber led many to believe that the gods had grown angry with them for having Ptolemy restored to his throne in Egypt. They therefore managed to have the man responsible for this policy, Gabinius, condemned to death, even though the Sibylline oracles did not recommend any punishment when they were consulted.³²

Disasters offered opportunities for unusual policies to be aired by those who did not usually benefit from the political process. So when human apparitions appeared alongside earth tremors, one man put forward a motion to cancel all debts.³³ Indeed, the opportunities that disasters offered the poor to benefit from resultant displays of elite generosity were so well recognized that in 7 BCE some even blamed the debtor class for starting a fire on purpose, 'so that they might have some of their debts remitted when they appeared to have lost heavily'.³⁴ Disasters also offered the chance for the people to express openly opinions about the moral qualities of their rulers. So when in the late empire the body of an official called Anatolius, who had died in an earthquake, was being carried away for burial, 'some of the people in the crowd began to spread the rumour that his death had been a just punishment since he had been an evil and unscrupulous

man and had robbed many people of their possessions'. Agathias, who records this story, is less sure that this was the case, though he agrees that an earthquake which could distinguish the wicked from the good would be a boon. However, he concludes with the sentiment there was much to be said for not interfering with and indeed encouraging these popular notions, as they deterred wrongdoers and criminals in general.³⁵

Ancient society was more rigid and steeply stratified than the modern world, and anything which shook the certainties of that order could leave people feeling profoundly unsettled. We have seen that many responded to the threats posed by disasters by ideological retrenchment: reasserting traditional values to shore them up at a time when they were under pressure. But the disorder generated by disasters could also force people to confront realities that were both shocking and deeply disorienting. For one thing, suffering a disaster implied that the gods were no longer necessarily on the Romans' side. Whether this was the result of a temporary displeasure or a more permanent falling out could only be ascertained by the correct religious interpretation. However, disasters could also shake people's faith in the gods. As people groped for explanations to help them come to terms with what they had undergone, it was perhaps natural for some to question the very ideologies and practices that underpinned their normal certainties. The Greek historian Thucydides had noted that the plague in Athens had brought about a greater lawlessness, because short-term pleasure-seekers began to regard their bodies and their wealth alike as transitory. The customary religious inhibitions broke down under the shock of the plague, and 'no fear of gods or the law restrained people'. With so many dying, good and bad alike, people 'judged that piety and impiety amounted to the same thing'.³⁶ In a similar fashion, the dream-interpreter Artemidorus noted that to dream of committing any sacrilegious act in a temple is inauspicious for all men and portends great crises, because 'men who are in great distress also abandon their reverence towards the gods'.³⁷

Disasters could also undermine people's confidence in their political leadership. Under the emperor Claudius, Tacitus noted that a variety of prodigies and portents, including famine and the appearance of ominous birds, were construed by the populace as being a sign of divine displeasure at Rome's leader. The people responded by actively voicing their complaints and even went so far as to man-handle the emperor in the forum.³⁸ In view of the amateurishness of many Romans in authority, popular protests at their incompetence are understandable. People were perfectly prepared to believe the worst of their emperors. So when Nero tried to scapegoat the Christians after

the Great Fire of 64 CE, after various other attempts to appease the gods had failed to placate Rome's furious inhabitants, people still believed that the emperor himself had started it. Given the unpopularity of the Christians, 'hated for their vices' and thought deserving of the severest punishment – which was, as we have seen, one of the driving factors in Nero's trying to blame them – this is a strong testament to the refusal of the Roman people simply to be led by their leadership to whatever conclusion suited the leaders' agenda.³⁹

Christians themselves interpreted disasters within an even more clearly defined teleological framework. Disasters were part of the mysterious workings of the Lord, and were therefore something to be accepted, if not understood. But Christians shared with pagan Romans the view that disasters were often heaven-sent means of chastisement for the wicked behaviour of those on earth. The great Christian orator John 'golden-mouthed' Chrysostom gave it to his flock straight as to why they had suffered an earthquake: 'the earthquake came because of our laxity. We relaxed, and we summoned the earthquake.' God's anger at their lack of piety meant that in one moment 'everything was torn apart more easily than a spider's web, everything was shattered, and the city was full of shrieking'.⁴⁰ Augustine explains in one of his sermons that people should always interpret any distresses or afflictions they suffer as both a warning and a correction from God.⁴¹ Indeed, it was a natural part of human existence to undergo such tribulations because of our inherent sinfulness, our inability to treat God as he deserved. 'When were things ever going well for the human race?', he asks: 'When was there ever no fear, no grief, when was there ever assumed unhappiness, ever not real unhappiness?' Disasters, therefore, were interpreted within this framework as being a divine punishment for sin. The victims themselves had caused their own suffering as a result of their own immorality.

The advent of a disaster could therefore generate a terrible sense of sin among its Christian victims in that they blamed themselves for its occurrence. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* describes the many afflictions of the city of Edessa in the period 494–506, including war, famine and disease. The author repeatedly stresses that these sufferings were chastisements from God designed to bring people to repent of their sins. He emphasizes that the people had been given more than adequate warning as to what was about to befall them: indeed the sign of the cross held by a statue of the emperor Constantine had moved away about a cubit from the statue's hand and stayed there for two days, but the people 'became even more presumptuous and we readily applied ourselves to sinning'. Common

people went about slandering their neighbours, nobles became utter sycophants, and 'adultery and immorality multiplied'.⁴² The sense of grief and self-reproach which a disaster could therefore create within the Christian community seemed almost limitless and was a feature on which Christian writers often chose to dwell. Basil of Caesarea, in his text *In Time of Famine and Drought*, describes how when the crops fail, the fields are full of people 'weeping over their fruitlessness'. The farmers, kneeling heavily in the fields and gripping their knees with their hands, 'weep over their vain toil, looking toward their young children and crying, gazing at their lamenting wives and wailing, stroking and, like a blind man, groping for their parched produce, wailing greatly like fathers losing their sons in the flower of manhood'. All of which, Basil emphasizes, is the result of their own turning away from God.⁴³

What gave disasters an added significance for Christians was that the sufferings they engendered gave a foretaste of the truly terrible pains that would accompany the imminent end of the world on Judgement Day. Augustine was keen to emphasize that, however bad the effects of a disaster on earth might seem, they were as nothing compared with the excruciating torments that awaited the damned at the end of time.⁴⁴ Even the sack of Rome in 410 CE, from which he says there have emerged 'horrific stories of destruction, of fires, or rapes, slaughter, and people tortured', cannot be compared to those of hell. For Christians, therefore, an earthly disaster might be seen as a sign of God's generosity towards His sinful people, for it represented an exhortation to repent and reform before it was too late. Not only that, but disasters held a double significance in that they were themselves taken to be phenomena that signalled that the day of judgement was close at hand. They were the precursors to that ultimate disaster, the Apocalypse.

Disasters could be given a positive interpretation within this outlook. The suffering of calamitous events might represent a punishment but it was a corrective designed by God to force His flock back onto the straight and narrow. This was a comforting thought given that He would, after all, only have taken such trouble with what He regarded as His chosen people. To suffer a disaster was to have God's love confirmed. John Chrysostom argued that it was only because God loved His people and did not want to destroy them that He had sent an earthquake in advance 'like a herald', forewarning everyone of His anger so that they might 'be improved by fear and prevent the actual retribution'. Or as Basil argued, God had sent the famine like a father 'eager to draw them out of childish negligence and youthful sins into diligence'. Such tough love emphasized to people that being a

Christian did not represent a simple path to acquiring eternal life. But it also shows that Christians had to work hard to justify the ways of God after a disaster had struck. A natural reaction could also have been to have one's faith in the divine providence and benevolence shaken.⁴⁵ Tracts such as those of John and Basil reassured people that disasters did not just happen, but had meaning. They were part of God's plan for humanity. God was simply acting through nature to deliver His ultimately positive message of hope and salvation for the true believer.⁴⁶

Disasters, therefore, offered the believer the opportunity to prove the strength of his or her faith. As Basil said of the famine and the drought, such trials revealed whether the afflicted one was 'philanthropic, aware of community identity, thankful'. For 'distresses reveal the soul as fire does gold'.⁴⁷ Famine was perhaps the best disaster for revealing Christian purpose because the physical deterioration that the body suffered acted as a metaphor for the struggle of the soul towards salvation. It had been Adam's eating of the apple that had first brought sin into human experience, so famine seemed to cleanse the body of that impurity. Basil's description of the suffering of the starving focuses on every lurid detail to emphasize their torment:

Starvation, the distress of the famished, is the supreme human calamity, a more miserable end than all other deaths. For when one considers other life-threatening calamities, the sword brings a quick end; fire too extinguishes life quickly; and even wild beasts, tearing the limbs apart with their teeth, inflict fatal wounds which assure that the distress will not be prolonged. But famine is a slow evil, always approaching, always holding off like a beast in its den. The heat of the body cools. The form shrivels. Little by little strength diminishes. Flesh stretches across the bones like a spider web. The skin loses its bloom, as the rosy appearance fades and blood melts away. Nor is the skin white, but rather it withers into black while the livid body, suffering pitifully, manifests a dark and pale mottling. The knees no longer support the body but drag themselves by force, the voice is powerless, the eyes are sunken as if in a casket, like dried-up nuts in their shells; the empty belly collapses, conforming itself to the shape of the backbone without any natural elasticity of the bowels.⁴⁸

But this most terrible nature of starvation itself gave an opportunity for Christians to show true charity by donating food to relieve the hungry. Famine supplied a ready means for Christians to 'blot out' Adam's treacherous consumption of the apple by feeding those who had nothing to eat.⁴⁹

Not all disasters, however, had to be catastrophic to show God's love for His people. Miraculous interventions could ensure that a disaster would have no victims, thereby revealing God's mercy. Nor were disasters predestined to happen. Christians could therefore do something to improve their situation through their faith. Like Ammianus, Jerome records how, after the death of the emperor Julian the Apostate in 363 CE, there was an earthquake which caused 'the sea to burst its bounds, and left ships hanging on the edges of mountainsides'. Such a tsunami made it seem that God was threatening a second deluge. When the people of Epidaurus saw this, fearing that their town would be utterly destroyed, they took the holy man Hilarion to the shore. After making the sign of the cross three times on the sand, 'he faced the sea, stretched out his hands, and no one would believe to what a height the swelling sea stood like a wall before him. It roared for a long time as if indignant at the barrier, then little by little sank to its level.' As Jerome says, 'Truly, what was said to the Apostles "If you have faith, you shall say to this mountain, Go into the sea, and it shall be done", may be even literally fulfilled, provided one has such faith as the Lord commanded the Apostles to have.'⁵⁰

Such vigorous attempts by Christian treatises to see disasters as a benefit for their victims reflect an attempt to conceal the fact that alternative interpretations existed within the Christian community. The fact that preachers tried so hard to pin the blame on the behaviour of their audience suggests that not everyone agreed with their view of what constituted correct Christian behaviour. Basil himself tells us that his flock devoted themselves 'to market profit' while their women colluded with them in their materialism. 'Few remain at prayer with me', he complains, 'and these are distracted, yawning, constantly looking around and waiting for the cantor to finish the psalms, so they will be dismissed.'⁵¹ However strongly Basil might assert that it was the practice of usury which caused the drought – 'when copper, gold, and inert substances multiply contrary to nature, then that which is naturally fecund becomes barren' – it is clear that most people did not act accordingly.⁵² Obviously, such pronouncements reflect the florid rhetoric of the public speaker. But such texts suggest that the Christian laity did not automatically believe what their elders told them about the causes of disasters, and made up their own minds about what represented acceptable forms of behaviour.

The fact that many people seemed more inclined to blame demons for disasters also suggests that they did not simply accept that their own immoral behaviour was the cause of most disasters. It was more

attractive and even intuitively obvious to see evil, external forces as responsible for the occurrence of dreadful and random disasters. When the villagers of Apoukoumis slaughtered an ox for a feast, those who ate the meat fell dead, not because of their own poor behaviour, but because a troop of demons had passed through the pot. What is particularly interesting about this story is that when the local saint sent some holy water to sprinkle on the victims, all recovered bar one who had run to a 'woman who used enchantments and, taking an amulet from her, hung it on to his brother, who immediately died'.⁵³ For what this reveals clearly is that Christianity was in competition with many other popular forms of religiosity. Disasters, therefore, offered an opportunity for the church to assert its religious authority over these 'superstitions'. Likewise, the stress and panic a disaster could generate offered Christians an opportunity to convert the wavering and drive the indifferent back into the churches. Augustine tells how God once decided to terrify the city of Constantinople 'and by terror to correct it, by terror to convert it, by terror to cleanse it'. He therefore sent a revelation to a faithful servant of His, a military man, telling him that the city was going to perish in fire coming from heaven, and instructed him to tell the bishop. He did so. The bishop addressed the people and the city was converted to mourning and repentance.⁵⁴

Disasters could become a useful weapon in inter-religious rivalry. When Antioch was hit by an earthquake in the year 528 CE, and was laid waste for a 10-mile radius, the authorities looked for reasons to explain why God had inflicted this scourge upon them. Sure enough, they discovered at the same time a group of Manichaeans, who used to gather in houses in Constantinople to practise their 'abominable and erroneous' doctrine. The emperor Justinian tried to convince them by debate, but 'with satanic haughtiness' they fearlessly bellowed before him: 'We are ready to be burned for the teaching of Mani and we will bear all tortures and suffering rather than abandon it!' The emperor ordered that their wish be granted, and had them sent out to sea in boats that were then set on fire. Before the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, we have seen that it had been the Christians who had sometimes borne the brunt of such scapegoating. In the late second and early third centuries CE, the Christian apologist Tertullian felt forced to defend his religion against the charge that it was responsible for causing all kinds of public calamities: 'If the Tiber overflows its banks . . . or the earth quakes, if a plague rages, or famine kills, your cry immediately is, "this is the fault of the Christians!"' He himself realized that it was because the Christians were 'despisers' of the pagan gods that they brought these

accusations upon themselves. Pagan Romans must recognize, he argues, that terrible things happened before the Christians were around: 'What terrible wars, both foreign and civil, what pestilences, famines, conflagrations, and earthquakes has history recorded! Where were the Christians, then, when the Roman state furnished so many chronicles of its disasters?' Or what part did the Christians have to play when the flames from the Romans' own mountain, Vesuvius, consumed Pompeii? In fact, he says that the Romans realize that their gods, if they do exist, are extremely unjust because they injure their own worshippers on account of their despisers, the Christians.⁵⁵

The occurrence of disasters provided the ammunition for religious attack and counter-attack for centuries. The fifth-century writer Orosius saw the plagues of the third century as direct divine retaliation for the emperor Decius' persecution of the Christians in the early 250s. Similarly, he argued that the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenae should be interpreted as a lesson in what happens to those who like to witness the slaughter of their fellow men in gladiatorial combat.⁵⁶ The fourth-century aristocratic pagan Symmachus argued that it was beneficial for the Roman state to continue to fund traditional priesthoods because it promoted agricultural yields and, at the very least, should be seen by Christians not as an act of generosity but as a theological insurance policy in case they were wrong.⁵⁷ Augustine's *City of God* can be seen in part as a response to the sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410, its first for 800 years, which so shocked people and made many blame the disaster on the empire's adoption of Christianity.

Imagining future disaster also acted as a powerful weapon in the religious armoury. Apocalyptic visions could work in two principal ways: as a means of enforcing certain codes of behaviour within particular religious groups; and as a way of generating a sense of imminent social justice among the downtrodden through the divine retribution of their oppressors. We have seen how disasters were seen as foreshadowing the trials of Judgement Day and were used as a means of encouraging and coercing Christians into following the church's moral guidance. But the aggressive deployment of forthcoming disasters against their Roman enemies offered some conquered minorities a way of imaginatively resisting their social and religious oppression. It represented the use of the future as part of the struggle for the present.⁵⁸ Often it is an environment of disasters – such as being conquered – which makes such millennial ideas attractive.⁵⁹ It takes a disaster, or a series of disasters, to reshape the social context sufficiently to produce a wider questioning of pre-existing norms and make people abandon the values of the past in

favour of further rapid transformation. But not all areas that have suffered disasters or military conquest produce millennial ideas. It seems to require a context of massive social disruption, pre-existing apocalyptic ideas and the presence of charismatic figures for these ideas to be generated. In the face of great change, many societies become defensive and rigid, rejecting the very idea of any further change. But confronted with the reality of Roman rule, some did choose to construct a more attractive, more just utopia in the future, in which their own community reasserted its self-worth and the existing social and political order was consigned to the dust. In such millenarian movements, the morality of the old order was deliberately flouted and overturned. The high were made low and all were made equal in death. Sometimes such radical social movements consciously reject fundamental taboos such as incest or cannibalism as part of the process of rejecting the old order. The rebels of Catiline, for example, who tried to overturn the Roman state in 63 BCE, reputedly carried out such rituals of collective obscenity by performing a human sacrifice and feasting on the flesh as a means of binding themselves closer together.⁶⁰ Of course, such stories may well have been untrue, but even if so this was the kind of untruth that a hostile writer would ascribe to Catiline and his supporters in order to emphasize their revolutionary nature.

Apocalyptic literature looked forward to the end of Rome, when retribution would come and justice be restored.⁶¹ One of these texts rejoices in foretelling the destruction that Vesuvius wrought, 'when from a cleft in the earth, a flame of fire shoots out its light to the broad heaven, to burn up many cities and slay their men, and a great cloud of fiery ashes shall fill the air, and sparks fiery red shall fall from heaven'. This, the Romans should know, was the wrath of the God of heaven, which they had deserved because they themselves had destroyed the blameless people of the godly.⁶² Another example, known as the *Oracles of Hystaspes*, in a highly charged piece of political invective, predicts Rome's imminent fall, when its 'empire and its name will be removed from the face of the earth'. Power shall return home to its rightful kings, and the wicked Romans shall be punished and righteousness shall triumph as a result of God's direct intervention in history. There will be earthquakes, floods, plagues and famines. Probably dating from the first century BCE in Asia Minor, part of this apocalyptic work made its way into the Book of Revelation in the Bible.⁶³ It appears to have become widely disseminated among Near Eastern groups suffering from Roman domination, with various versions existing, each appealing to different religious groups. Not surprisingly, the oracle was banned within the empire, although such

prohibitions were almost impossible to enforce and so were largely symbolic.

Such texts deal with a time when traditional categories in some areas were breaking down as a result of Roman intervention. The transformation of the social hierarchy was a rare event in antiquity and could generate great confusion. It was not surprising, then, that some people, who were on the receiving end of this radical Roman restructuring of their lives, sought solace in stories which looked forward to times of similar upheaval to redress what they saw as the injustice of what had happened. They dreamed of a future when law and military order would be overthrown, a time of such equalization that even the mountains of the earth would be levelled off. Social stratification would be flattened alongside them and all would be reduced to fear and impotence.⁶⁴ Above all, the hated Romans would get their richly deserved come-uppance.

Apocalyptic ideas imagined a bloody reconstruction of society in which a new, Roman-free hierarchy held sway. The humiliations which the Romans had inflicted represented an affront to the fundamental decencies of these conquered societies. Dreaming of a complete reversal of that situation was a way to express militant solidarity in favour of a new order. As such, millenarianism enabled people to come to terms with the dramatic changes brought about by the disasters inflicted on them by the invading Romans. It allowed them to look forward to a new and better future. Whether in the end it represented anything more than letting off steam is impossible to say. To be sure, such texts represented in many ways the empty rhetorical gestures of the powerless. But the writing of such vitriolic responses also acted as a ritual which symbolically stated and celebrated the unbridgeable gap that lay between the writers and the Romans. There would be no assimilation or Romanization here. Apocalyptic texts undid some of the hurt by imagining sacrilegious acts of even greater offensiveness being enacted against the Romans.



Wall-painting from a Christian catacomb showing the fiery furnace from the Book of Daniel, an image often used as a metaphor for the Roman persecution of the Christians.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Yet it would be wrong to suppose that all Christians shared these kinds of views. The apocalyptic texts of early Christianity are few and far between.⁶⁵ Christians like Tertullian wrote in glowing terms about the quality of life under Roman rule. The world, he says, is obviously becoming better cultivated and more fully populated. Commerce is thriving, and ‘everywhere are houses, and inhabitants, and settled government, and civilized life’. Indeed it is the teeming population that he finds most striking, a sure sign of the world’s prosperity. But such numbers of people are ‘burdensome to the world, which can hardly supply us from its natural elements’. As people grow more demanding, wanting more and more, disasters actually provide a simple cure for this overpopulation. Pestilence, famine, wars and earthquakes ‘have to be regarded as a remedy for nations, as the means of pruning the luxuriance of the human race’.⁶⁶ These were not the retributive disasters of the Apocalypse, but a natural solution to the imbalance between the size of the human population and the ability of the environment to provide for it.

We have seen in this chapter how multiple interpretations of disasters were formulated in the Roman world. Disasters could be seen as prophetic signs, geological phenomena or events that changed the

course of history. In the religious context, the causation of disasters was rationalized as being the will of the gods, with all the problems of justification that this brought. The Romans often saw a direct linkage between immorality and the occurrence of disaster. The descriptions and stories people told about disasters, therefore, served as warnings about current behaviour and were couched in moral terms. As John of Ephesus said, when in 551 CE a powerful earthquake happened along the coast of Lebanon, and 'the sea retreated and drew back for about two miles': 'we wanted to put into writing, for the instruction of future generations, an account of the terrible disaster and the great and wondrous sign that occurred'. In other words, the many disaster accounts and stories we have from the Roman empire served a didactic purpose: to promote the ideological aims of the writer. Such texts were one of the ways in which thinking about disasters permeated Roman culture. The benefit of that culture was that it permitted intellectual flexibility in the face of extreme situations. That culture, however, also contributed to the hazardous environment in which many Romans habitually found themselves.

A Culture of Risk

Vulnerability

Disasters are not simply acts of chance, completely beyond human influence. Disasters are a part of the social landscape that reflects the normal hierarchies of everyday life. To be sure, in some of the most developed modern societies they may happen infrequently and impact only modestly, but that is in reality a function of the fact that such societies spend vast resources of time and money on minimizing both the risks to which their citizens are exposed and the effects on them when such exposure does occur. The Roman world was one in which far less care was taken over its inhabitants. A context of various disasters was the norm. Not only that, but many of these events were generated by the system itself. It would be simplistic to see these happenings as being unexpected bolts from the blue. The severity and form of these calamities were to some extent governed by the pre-existing structure of Roman society. Not only does modern research on the epidemiology of disasters – the quantitative study of the distribution and determinants of health-related crisis events – tell us to expect to find such pre-existing social inequalities reflected in the manner in which a disaster impacts upon a people, but many such disasters are actually created by these long-established problems and inequalities. Poverty, poor housing and poor nutrition can all be expected to generate crises, which themselves will hit the most vulnerable groups hardest. It is, therefore, the social system itself that is the real source of vulnerability.

Disasters are inherently social events. It is, after all, only the fact that a human population is adversely affected by such things as earthquakes that makes them disasters at all. Comparative data from modern studies can give us some idea of the degree of morbidity and mortality associated with disasters. In major earthquakes, deaths are likely to exceed 10 per cent of the population of certain settlements close to the epicentre, whilst a few of the worst-affected places can suffer fatalities of as much as 85 per cent. Mortality rates clearly vary enormously. Generally, injuries outnumber deaths by a ratio of about 3:1, although this varies considerably according to both the particular

disaster and the criteria that are used to define an injury. The worst impact often occurs after what we think of as the disaster itself. Although it is a disaster myth that disease and epidemic always follow a disaster, floods can increase the risk of faecal-oral transmission of disease and rodent-borne disease. Similarly, forced migration away from a disaster zone can lead to a myriad of problems relating to poor food supply and inadequate shelter. Disaster-related health problems are frequently exacerbated by the pre-existing poor nutritional status of the victims, which leaves them more vulnerable to any increase in disease. The factors which cause death vary according to the type of disaster, so that drowning obviously goes with floods and tsunamis, while death from impact events, structural collapse and falling debris characterizes earthquakes. On average, tsunamis have the highest mortality rates, although again it has to be emphasized that the range of outcomes is extremely wide.

An individual's vulnerability to a disaster can be affected by a number of factors. Being exposed to a dangerous environment, such as living on a flood plain, will obviously increase the susceptibility to suffering damage in a flood. Poor building techniques will make death and injury more likely in an earthquake. Lack of social protection for the poorest will increase their suffering during a famine. Poverty will most often reduce group and individual resilience, that is to say, the capacity to withstand and recover from the disaster. Socioeconomic status is a key marker in an individual's potential vulnerability to disaster.¹ The weakest members of society tend to lack the resources to enable them to anticipate, avoid, cope with or recover from disaster. The most vulnerable groups are usually women, children, the elderly, immigrants and the poor, all of whom are disproportionately affected by disasters. Other significant variables include class, wealth, occupation, ethnicity, disability, health and available social networks. Yet it would be misleading to pretend that there is always clarity as to how these factors operate within different disaster scenarios. Some disasters have clear negative consequences for certain groups. Diseases such as typhoid tend to be concentrated among the poor urban classes, because agricultural workers are more isolated and working out of doors. Workers in harbour areas tend to be particularly vulnerable to any disease that can be imported alongside cargo. Domestic servants and women can be made vulnerable by dint of their frequent contact with unboiled water, human waste and uncooked food. Living in overcrowded conditions can make the poor more likely to catch communicable disease. Starvation tends to attack the already hungry, since it exacerbates the pre-existing shortages that have already left the hungry dangerously vulnerable to further malnutrition or disease.

Who gets what and what happens to whom, therefore, are part of a social process, not just the result of isolated events. Often these processes are long-term. Political and social marginalization, reflected in access to food, political rights and ideology, creates at-risk communities over generations not weeks. The effect of these chronic inequalities means that it generally makes little sense to see a disaster as a short-term, acute event. This can make the study of disaster especially interesting as it reveals some of the complex social interactions which have contributed to the disaster to begin with. There is, as Oliver-Smith says, much to be learned about a society and its culture 'when all hell breaks loose'.²

So much for modern theory and research. What can we learn about vulnerability to different forms of disaster in the Roman world? The first, and perhaps greatest, issue is the problem of data. Some numbers seem broadly reliable. So, for example, when Tacitus records that 50,000 were maimed or killed when the amphitheatre at Fidenae collapsed, it looks like a reasonable assessment of how many were affected, given what is known about the size of other similar structures and the fact that a huge crowd had crammed into it after a period when gladiatorial combats had been banned.³ But most numbers appear to be at best guesswork or deliberate and gross exaggerations. Joshua the Stylite says in his account of the siege of Amida that the city was exceptionally crowded at the time, meaning that 80,000 corpses were found after its fall. Given that the inhabited area of the place was about 100 hectares this gives an estimate of 12.5 square metres per corpse. Monaco is by far the most crowded of modern cities and has a population density of about 60 square metres per person. Joshua's estimate looks far too high given that pre-industrial cities generally have lower population density, even allowing for the fact that many people from outside will have flocked into the city in search of refuge from the invading Persians. John of Ephesus also had a tendency to exaggerate, which may also be seen in the figure of 250,000 he gives for the death toll caused by an earthquake in Antioch in 526 CE, compared with the number of 60,000 provided by another historian, Evagrius, for a later earthquake in the same city.⁴ John also gives us the figure of 250,000 dead for the flood which hit Edessa in 525, a number whose accuracy he says is attested by the fact that 'those who were alive were able to count the dead who were uncovered or found accidentally'. The number was swelled by the fact that it was a feast-day, meaning that many had congregated in the great city, but again it seems unlikely that the number that perished was equivalent to well over the entire population of the city. This is not to single out Joshua the Stylite and

John of Ephesus for particular criticism. It is a problem with many ancient accounts of disaster that they often wish it to appear in the worst possible light in order to justify their own recording of it. It is striking how often sources claim that such-and-such a disaster was ‘the worst ever’.

Most of our sources had no access to reliable information regarding the number of casualties because no such information existed. It was beyond the capacity or the interest of the Roman state to generate such data. Writers had to rely on estimates (for which read guesses), numbers given by other writers for similar disasters, and hearsay. Large-scale events, in particular, caused death on a scale that was above the ability of account writers to estimate accurately, even had they wished to. In the great plague that started in 541 CE, Procopius recounts that ‘the whole human race came near to being annihilated’.⁵ He tells us that in Constantinople the death toll reached a peak of 10,000 a day, and lasted for four months in total, and with the greatest violence for about three. If we take an average figure of 3,000 per day and only 1,000 for the less virulent month, we come to a total mortality figure of about 300,000, which looks much too high given that the likely population of the city at that time was not much more than that. When Procopius sighs ‘who could calculate the number of people who died?’, he is perhaps being more honest.

Even if we resign ourselves to the fact that the numbers given in ancient sources are mostly unreliable, we can still see some of the factors that affected the degree of distress which Romans will have experienced during various disasters. A complex picture emerges. Agathias records that after an earthquake of unparalleled magnitude and duration hit Constantinople, the horror was further accentuated by the time of year, when the cold had set in, by the fact that it hit at night, when most people were asleep and so within building structures, and by the fact that it occurred during the festival of the Brumalia, when the city was especially crowded.⁶ It would be interesting to find clear evidence of differential effects according to social status, but again the story is not quite so simple. Some disasters do seem to have affected certain sections of the population. So in the outbreak of plague in 174 BCE, ‘the slaves especially died; and along all the roads there were piles of their unburied bodies’.⁷ It is unclear why slaves should have been hit so hard, but it may have been the result of agricultural slaves being kept in cramped living conditions and so easily infecting each other. Particular disasters, such as famine, had a much clearer impact on the poorest in society for the simple reason that they lacked the resources to pay sky-rocketing food prices. Joshua the Stylite relates how when the plague arrived after a famine, it

struck down many of the rich 'who had not suffered from hunger'.⁸ Some disasters seem to have a counter-intuitive impact, such as when famine, plague and a vague 'other disease' combined to attack the rural population more than the urban. So great was the effect in the countryside that the registers of names were all but entirely wiped out, 'for one might almost say that the entire population perished all at once through lack of food and through plague'.⁹ Some plagues were more vicious and unaccommodating than others. John of Ephesus describes how the great plague 'cut down and threw people of various statures, distinctions, and ranks together'; indeed, it affected both large and small houses, 'in which both servants and masters fell suddenly together'. Yet the pestilence that struck in the reign of Marcus Aurelius was notable, not only because 'thousands were carried off by the pestilence', but because it included 'many nobles'.¹⁰

Within the city of Rome, it is also hard to discern any regular pattern of differential impact. Urban environments tend to increase risks for the poorest because of the high density of population and the poor quality of housing. We cannot assume that this was the case in Rome. Rome's population was divided vertically not horizontally, meaning that areas of the city were less divided according to status and wealth than would now be the case. Modest residential buildings sat cheek by jowl with grand urban villas. Rome's infrastructure also provided some extra resilience, above all its large system of public food storage, water supply via its aqueducts, and the fact that free corn doles meant that the nutritional status of many may not have been as poor as might otherwise be expected. Interestingly, analysis of the bones of the victims of Pompeii does not suggest that there was any noticeable differential in terms of age or health. They appear to be from a normal distribution across the population, when we would expect to find a greater incidence of the weak and sick being left behind.¹¹ Of course, the eruption of Vesuvius was an extraordinary event, and it may have been the case that the people of Pompeii simply did not know how best to react to this situation. There was no falling back on the tried-and-tested methods of previous disasters as might have occurred in an event like a famine. The group that stayed therefore represented a broad cross-section of society, whereas in a more familiar crisis situation, those who could have fled, would have, abandoning the old and ill to fend for themselves. A similarly complicated picture emerges when we look at John of Ephesus' account of a night-time flood in Edessa in 525. The sudden inundation rushed through the gates of the public bath houses, drowning all those inside. Baths were cheap but late-night bathing was generally associated with men. In housing blocks, it was those inhabiting the lower storeys who perished. These

lower storeys tended to have larger, grander rooms and so will have contained a greater number of the city's wealthy. Those poorer folk in the upper storeys would have survived as long as they did not go downstairs to try to escape the flood waters, unless their whole building collapsed under pressure from the torrent.

Some disasters do seem to have had a class bias. When the plague reached Constantinople in 542, it 'started with vigour first with the masses of poor people who were cast away in the streets. Sometimes five, seven, twelve and up to sixteen thousand persons among them were removed in a day.'¹² 'Thus', we are told, 'the poor vanished, though a small number of them survived.' When more than 300,000 of them had been struck down, the pestilence climbed up the social ladder, and then 'the rulers of the world, the people of renown in the earthly realm, people of great wealth and those who took delight in their power' were also smitten. All classes were engulfed by this dreadful disease: 'all one could see now was a great and violent blow that suddenly struck ordinary people and nobles alike'; 'it devoured both servants and masters and ordinary people alike without partiality'. Agathias' account of the earthquake in Constantinople, where the impact was exacerbated by the tremor's happening at night and in winter, tells us that 'large numbers of ordinary people perished in the disaster'. These were people who lacked the resources to help them when they had been left homeless and hungry in the freezing conditions. By contrast, of the 'persons of rank' and of the senators only one died, a man called Anatolius, who was in charge of the financial administration of the imperial households and estates.¹³

Class distinctions in attitudes towards disaster can be detected in Pliny's account of the eruption on Vesuvius. He recounts how his uncle had tried to allay the fears of his companions by repeatedly declaring that 'these were nothing but bonfires left by the peasants in their terror'. Then he went to rest and 'certainly slept'. This was how an elite military man felt he ought to act when disaster struck: cool and composed. In the end, when even Pliny's uncle had to admit that it was time to do something, he and his companions decided to make a run for it, and tied pillows on their heads with strips of cloth. Taking lamps to help them see in the darkness created by the ash cloud, he set off leaning on two slaves and then, with the flames and sulphur increasing, suddenly collapsed.¹⁴ The fact that his slaves died alongside him shows that it is not easy to apply modern models relating to disaster mortality to ancient examples. To some extent the slaves died only because they were with a wealthy member of the elite; but they were also not representative of the slave population as a whole, who would mostly have been serving in humbler situations

than this. The fact that they stayed with him to the bitter end is also a testament either to their loyalty towards their master or the degree of terror which the brutal Roman treatment of their slaves could instil.

On the basis of comparative data from modern studies, we would expect to find that gender-based inequalities were also reflected in differential vulnerability to disasters.¹⁵ Occasional references to the plight of some women do occur. In the eight year long famine at Amida that started in 546–7, the chronicler noted the particular severity of ‘the afflictions and suffering of mainly the poor, widows and orphans, who reached the verge of death’. Widows were generally left extremely vulnerable by the loss of their husbands, who would in most cases have been the main earner. Any situation which increased the difficulty of their situation could easily push them over the brink into destitution. Women are usually especially vulnerable in disasters which strike the domestic environment, as indeed are those in their care – children and sometimes the elderly. Any event, such as a day-time earthquake, striking when a greater proportion of women than men might be expected to have been within the confines of their homes, would probably have led to a far higher casualty rate among the female population than the male. Gender can also play an important role in how women experience and cope with the after-effects of a disaster. In famine periods, it is common for rations for the womenfolk to be reduced within a family so that the male bread-winners retain their capacity for manual work. The risk of emotional abuse and physical violence also seems to increase after the stress of a disaster event, especially among displaced young women who are left in a much more vulnerable situation. In fact, though, we find little evidence of such gender differentials in Roman evidence. Sometimes the opposite is reported. In a mid-sixth-century plague, it is reported that people of all ages were struck down indiscriminately, ‘but the heaviest toll was among the young and vigorous and especially among the men, women being on the whole much less affected’.¹⁶ Of course, the lack of evidence on these matters from the ancient world may simply reflect the gender bias in our sources. Male writers did not mention greater female mortality or morbidity because they failed to notice it, or if they did they did not think it important enough to record. Given that women were generally seen as physically and emotionally weak, it may well have seemed obvious that women would have suffered more in any troublesome times.

Risk

The main reason why Romans as a whole suffered more disasters than the inhabitants of a modern developed country is that they were systematically exposed to danger. Attitudes about what was deemed acceptable or unavoidable for individuals to be exposed to meant that most people faced a future which was surrounded by considerable levels of uncertainty. The very routineness of such dangers meant that they were largely ignored. They were part of the social order and so did not disrupt that order even when they caused widespread damage. Fire, for example, was something which Romans relied on for cooking, heating and light. Many other crafts depended on fire to enable them to pursue their trades: baking, glass-making, metalwork, felt-making all needed fire to function. In a densely inhabited city like Rome, where timber acted as the primary building material, the very fabric of the structure left it permanently at risk of disaster. Illness was also something the Romans could do little about from a modern medical view. Widespread death from disease, therefore, inevitably happened periodically and created considerable anxiety among all members of society, to judge from the content of oracles and ex-voto offerings made to the gods either pleading, or in gratitude, for recovery. Most disasters were features that characterized the social contexts in which they occurred. Food crises, for example, were a normal part of life. The variability in the Mediterranean climate meant that harvests could be bountiful one year and poor the next. Occasional shortages were, as a result, a 'normal' part of everyday life. That is to say that most people found themselves in a situation where they had insufficient resources to survive years of shortage comfortably and so were left vulnerable to crisis. When that crisis arose, as it habitually did, there was hunger, malnourishment and a risk of starvation. The famine, then, was the result of that vulnerability. Roman society could have directed far more of its resources to providing safety-nets and preventative measures to reduce the impact that any shortfall would have. The fact that it did not meant that famines should not be seen simply as acts of God or bad luck. It reflected the routine exposure to ever-present dangers that was a characteristic of living in the Roman world; an inbuilt, albeit terrifying, part of normality.

The Roman world was full of very real dangers but these could be assessed and treated according to their risk. Roman society required its inhabitants to embrace risk. It was a world where vital decisions at all levels of society had to be taken quickly and under pressure. Careful consideration by committee was not the norm. In effect, a culture of risk existed. People had to learn how to cope with living in a social context where they were exposed to significant dangers and they were expected to be able to respond to these threats in a

spontaneous and decisive manner. People's perception of small hazards was often at variance with the actual risk they were probably exposing themselves to. This is important because the perception of risk can tell us much about how people understood and constructed relations between the human and the divine worlds. It reveals how Roman society constructed an understanding of risk which left many of its population habitually exposed to grave dangers.

It is important, though, to bear in mind that risk does not only represent the possible downside to an event. Risk can be better understood as representing volatility. The term 'volatility' reflects the fact that risk can produce equally good and bad results. Risk in itself, therefore, is not the problem. It is the vulnerability of the risk-taker to any negative events that shapes their outlook. Not only that, but the dispersion of outcomes was enormous. Put simply, the difference between success and failure was often extreme. At the top end of Roman society, the rewards for successful risk-taking could be extremely high. Ambitious politicians, such as Julius Caesar, based their wealth and claim to leadership on their military success. It was Caesar's conquest of Gaul that paid back the sums he had borrowed to fund his earlier political career and provided him with the legions with which to dominate the senate. Had he failed he would either have died on the battlefield or been politically dead. At the other end of the social order, people had a range of risk-management techniques to help them cope with the considerable variation in their annual incomes that resulted from the substantial variability in harvests. Success in these practices led to what might seem to us modest improvements in their situation, but in the context of poverty, these small increments in income and resources could lead to substantial improvement in social standing. If they failed to control this volatility in their income stream, the result would be destitution or death.

Perceptions of risk are socially constructed.¹⁷ People do not calculate the precise probability of a particular outcome occurring and base their decisions on that. They assess the situation according to preconceived ideas. In the Roman world, the notion of probability did not even exist, although texts such as oracles suggest that people were unconsciously aware of the range of likely outcomes that an individual would normally be exposed to.¹⁸ Even if such a background alertness to risk did exist, there was a basic lack of accurate information for such assessment to represent anything other than guesswork informed by experience. Resources such as oracles and fables provided a collective treasure-trove of shared experience to be deployed in all kinds of risky situations. The *Oracles of Astrampsychus* contain ninety-two questions covering a range of everyday problems that inhabitants

of the Roman empire felt sufficiently concerned about to pay good money in order to receive divine help with. None are explicitly about large-scale disasters. These were remote risks, in the same way they are today. One question, however, reflects the far more everyday risk that many faced: the shipwreck. 'Will I sail safely?', the worried supplicant asks. What this suggests is that we should not see ancient Romans as being paralysed by anxiety about what great calamity might strike them next. People do not seem to have allowed such concerns to intrude on their daily lives. Instead, it was the small-scale disaster that they were far more likely to encounter in their everyday experience that they were concerned about. They more or less ignored the threat that potential catastrophes posed, while paying close attention to the very real hazards of the sea. Risk perceptions also varied according to social status. The rich were able to tolerate high degrees of volatility of returns because they could afford to suffer losses. This meant that they were prepared to invest in potentially highly lucrative ventures such as shipping. Those living close to subsistence level were much more vulnerable to volatility because they lacked the resources to cope with losses. Instead they concentrated on managing their possible downside risks, even if the cost of doing so was to forfeit some upside potential. Broadly speaking, therefore, risk tolerance was inversely related to social status.

Risk theory suggests that known dangers encourage the taking of precautions in both public and private spheres. Faced with an environment full of uncertainties, the Romans actively developed an array of risk-management strategies to help them cope.¹⁹ They could be risk-averse when it suited them. The poor, in particular, found much advice in fables to steer clear of men more powerful than themselves or to avoid getting tangled up in any kind of legal dispute. Diversification was also a commonly used approach as a means of generating a wider range of income streams that would better be able to withstand the impact of any negative event. If you relied on your wheat crop, for example, which was then destroyed by a flood, you had a better chance of surviving if one of your sons worked as a labourer in the docks and your wife had devoted considerable effort to maintaining close links with her family members in the next village who might have been unaffected by the disaster. So pervasive was the threat of extreme variations in income and food supply that the possibility was hard-wired in to the pattern of daily life. Constant calculation was required to make do with limited resources in a risk-filled environment: deciding which children to feed if food ran short; planning for potential threats to particular crops; spreading losses

when they did occur in such a way that the family unit would best survive as a going concern; slowly managing to get back to normality after a shock. To some extent, therefore, the popular culture was itself the product of having to generate ways of coping with the ever-present risk of disaster.

Marine Gladiators

Living against a backdrop of potential disaster created a cultural system. As an example of how this worked in practice, I want to look more closely at one particular area that involved a considerable amount of active risk management and always had the potential to end in disaster: working with the sea. The Mediterranean lay at the heart of the Roman world and whether it was through travel, fishing, transport or communication, many Romans had regularly to confront and deal with the many risks which this great body of water generated.²⁰ I want to suggest that those who worked in this environment developed a set of practices and beliefs, a culture, which enabled them to cope with its inbuilt risks.

The Romans were well aware of the different levels of risk that the sea could pose, but also understood that these were risks worth taking. Artemidorus advises that 'it is always better to sail in a large vessel that is carrying solid freight, since small boats, even on a good voyage, signify good things that involve some element of fear'.²¹ Other ancient clues suggest that thinking of the sea brought to mind great uncertainties. The replies of Secundus, the Silent Philosopher, to the question 'What is a boat?' contain the following: 'a prison in winged flight', 'fate bound up in a package', 'the plaything of the winds', 'a floating death', 'uncertain safety' and 'death in prospect'. Being on the sea was an inherently dangerous business. Similarly, his replies to the question 'What is a sailor?' show how anyone who inhabited this dangerous world needed to cope with this level of uncertainty: a sailor was 'a deserter of the land' and 'a stranger to the inhabited world', underlining what a separate kind of life they led and what a different kind of culture they possessed. A sailor was 'the opponent of the storm', who is 'unsure of his safety', and 'a neighbour to death'. Despite all this, he is a 'lover of the sea'. Above all, he has to go where the winds take him and, in a phrase which neatly encapsulates all the dangers and constant risk assessments that struggling with the sea entailed, he is 'a marine gladiator'.²²

The stress that being caught in a storm could create was substantial. Ancient jokes can reveal something of these tensions. In one, an

egghead was on a sea voyage when a big storm blew up, causing his slaves to weep in terror. 'Don't cry,' he consoled them, 'I have freed you all in my will.' Or when he was on a ship that ran into a storm, seeing his fellow passengers grabbing hold of various things in an effort to save themselves, he hung on to one of its anchors. Or when he was in a ship that was in danger of sinking in a storm, his fellow passengers started throwing things overboard from their luggage to lighten the vessel, and they urged him to do the same. Whereupon, he produced a bank note worth 150,000, snipped off the final zeros and said, 'See by how much money I have lightened the ship!' When a coward was asked, 'What ships are safer, war ships or merchant ships?', his reply was 'Docked ships'.²³



Merchant ships, like the one shown in this wall-painting, frequently sank carrying out their dangerous work.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Shipwreck was a very real risk in the ancient world and represented the kind of small-scale disaster which habitually worried people far more than the remote risk of an earthquake.²⁴ Accidents could happen even when in harbour. A wreck of a Hellenistic ship, which had in the early second century BCE brought a mixed cargo to Pisa, including wine, shoulders of pork, three horses and a lioness, seems to have collided with a harbour structure. Human bones have been found among the cargo that slipped overboard.²⁵ Hundreds of other ancient wrecks have been discovered in the Mediterranean. The interest rate charged on maritime loans was generally as high as 20 per cent because of the high level of risk associated with shipping. Using an

implied loss rate, we can calculate that this equates to a loss rate of 12 per cent per annum.²⁶ This figure will overstate the realized loss rate because of the inclusion of a risk premium, which represents the reward for taking on the extra risk involved in maritime lending. If we assume a healthy profit margin of 50 per cent, this means that only 6 per cent of ships were wrecked. So we can say that prevailing loan rates suggest that about one in sixteen commercial ships were wrecked each year. It would be reasonable to assume that this usually entailed the loss of all cargo and crew as well.

When caught in a situation where the ship might sink, people were popularly believed to display the kind of panic behaviour often expected in any disaster situation. In Achilles Tatius' novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*, the duo are caught in a storm: 'It was a pandemonium of noise: roaring waves, blustering wind, the shrill shouts of women, the hoarser cries of men, the sharp commands of sailors, an utter welter of various wailings.' The captain ordered all cargo to be jettisoned. No distinction was made between gold or silver and other valuables and it was tossed overboard. Many of the merchants on the ship 'laid hands on their own goods and energetically heaved their hopes for profit overboard'. Eventually the captain gave up and, abandoning the rudder, 'surrendered the ship to the sea'. He and the crew boarded the one lifeboat but the passengers saw them and tried to get on too: 'Then followed a fearful scene of fighting hand to hand'. All forms of social nicety and decency broke down under the stress of this panic and 'each man sought only his own safety and suppressed his more generous impulses'. As Tatius dryly adds, 'momentous crises have a way of making one's philanthropy flag'. Justice is done when the escaping crew's boat hits a rock and sinks. Some died quickly and 'were spared the prolonged terror of a slow sea death, which kills you a thousand times before you die', and during which long-drawn-out process, the 'fear is infinitely multiplied by the ocean's endless vista'. Some were dashed on the rocks, others impaled on the points of shattering planks 'like speared fish'.²⁷ This fictional account doubtless contains much exaggeration, but we can also get a sense of how very real a fear shipwreck was from the frequency with which Christian saints intervene to help those in peril on the sea. Simon Stylites, for example, many times appeared 'manifestly to many sailors and helped them in their distresses in the times of danger, when storms and tempests arose against them'. And when he appeared, 'the waves were stilled, and the tempests were quieted', for the saint was 'much concerned for the affairs of those who sail on the sea'.²⁸

The necessity of working in such a dangerous environment made sailors 'marine gladiators'. Having frequently to make difficult and

vitality important decisions under extreme pressure made a comparison with those who fought for their lives in the arena seem appropriate. Fishermen also encapsulated the kind of tough, physical expertise which most people needed to possess to survive in the harsh world of the Roman empire. They had constantly to assert their position in the competitive, masculine world of the boat if they were to receive their fair share of the catch. They had to carry out endlessly repetitive jobs with skill and care. The fact that they faced so many tricky situations and decisions also made fishermen ‘good to think with’. Many Roman fables used fishermen to exemplify the kind of difficult decisions which people had to take regularly in their everyday lives and to warn them of what could happen if they got them wrong. In one story, an ape who tries to act like a fisherman is himself caught: ‘I got what I deserved,’ he confesses, ‘for why did I ever try to fish without learning the trade.’ As the moral of the tale spells out, ignorance is dangerous.²⁹

Fishermen looked for small gains, because this is what best enabled them to eke out a living. A fable tells the story of the fisherman and the minnow. A fisherman once caught a minnow that begged to be thrown back in the water and be caught later when it had grown bigger: ‘I would certainly be a great fool’, says the fisherman, ‘if I let go the gain I have in hand and went chasing after some vague hope.’³⁰ A jackpot mentality was extremely dangerous for the average man. Instead such people had to try to minimize the volatility in their incomes by ensuring a steady stream of small positive gains. In order to have the best chance of achieving this, it was important to have a trade, a skill-set that could give them some kind of advantage in the daily struggle for survival. The expert fisherman had a substantial advantage over many of his fellow men. In Heliodorus’ novel *The Aethiopian Story*, we encounter an old fisherman, Tyrrhenos, who is a ‘master of his craft in all its forms, with a technique to suit every season’. The canny old fisherman has such ‘patiently acquired skills’ that he always has ‘a good catch’.³¹

Acquiring life-skills for most Romans meant learning how to assess risk: how to win small benefits in a highly competitive and challenging environment. Key decisions often had to be taken rapidly under pressure. Even then, catching fish was always fraught with the risk of coming home with the nets empty. The fisherman had to deal with the fact that for all his attempts to minimize the volatility of his catch, there would be many days when he had nothing. This kind of extreme distribution of returns was also seen in the significant variations found in agricultural crops on land. Agricultural volatility can be exceptionally high in the Mediterranean, with, for example,

annual average variations in harvests in excess of 60 per cent in Tunisia.³² Abundant harvests and big catches could easily be followed by dearth. Unless sufficient reserves had been put aside, the result would be hunger and want. The majority of Romans, therefore, who earned their living from the land or sea had to focus not only on generating a steady supply of produce but on keeping some for the bad times. The wealthier could afford to take a more relaxed attitude towards taking on risks in such activities as long-distance trade. Everyone else had to be constantly alert to the problems that a change in the productive capacity of their environment could cause.

Occasionally losing everything was an inevitable part of this life. In the fable of the coot, the bat and the bramble's shipping venture, the coot brings some bronze and puts it in their hold. But when the ship founders and they lose everything, the coot is inconsolable. 'Since then the coot has been diving down to the bottom, looking for her bronze, and is sure some day she will find it.'³³ The moral of the tale states that 'we pay more attention to those things in which we have previously had some unfortunate experience'. Which is true, but the main messages of the story are perhaps that you should not put all your eggs in one basket and that there is no point crying over spilt milk. Big losses should be avoided, but when they do happen you just have to move on. One of the problems that fishermen had in this environment is that big losses at sea meant that they had to rely on debt to help them survive periods of shortage. Borrowing allowed them to compensate for the fluctuations in their income, the plan being to repay the debt when the good times returned. In the account of his sea-journey on the coast of north Africa, the fourth-century bishop Synesius records how the ship's captain was so heavily in debt that he had sold the spare anchor and even pawned the sails.³⁴ The volatility of seamen's income meant that they became almost synonymous with being trapped in a cycle of debt dependency. So we find writers expressing the ruin of men in debt in terms of being stuck in a storm and suffering shipwreck.³⁵

Synesius describes how the crew of his boat consisted of a motley selection of Jews and peasants, who spent their time 'jesting with one another, accosting their comrades not by their real names, but by the distinguishing marks of their misfortunes'. They called each other nicknames such as 'Lame', 'Ruptured' and 'Goggle-eyed'.³⁶ Such jocular sparring helped create a small, well-knit group among the crew. Group morale was of the utmost importance because their collective safety could easily depend on it. The stresses of living and working together in the confines of the boat also made it essential to maintain group harmony. Making shared nicknames out of personal

defects also emphasized the public nature of being part of a crew. This was not a situation where the usual degree of personal space could be permitted. Using nicknames derived from individual weaknesses, therefore, stated and restated the emotional structure of the boat wherein no personal space could be permitted. Nicknaming also hints at the kind of aggressive model of interpersonal relations that probably existed among the crew. Boasting, arguing and scoring points off each other was the way equilibrium was maintained in an uncertain environment where it took a great deal of physical toughness to survive. Being tough on each other made sure that everyone in the group was up to the collective task at hand.³⁷

It is easy to imagine the typical Roman fisherman: hard as nails, knife-carrying, stinking of fish, and almost instinctively alert to risk. Fishermen's whole life revolved around collectively making a living out of a dangerous environment, which made them understand the importance of decision-making. Skilful, fit, sociable but highly aggressive towards each other: it is possible to see these qualities of personality reflected in the arena. One of the reasons for the popularity of gladiators was that they reflected this kind of ideal Roman personality type; the kind of man who was most likely to thrive in the fearsomely competitive world of the Roman empire. The kind of man who did not expect the law to help him out in personal conflicts but instead relied on a belief in personal honour and violence to assert his self-worth and gain revenge.

The Power of Luck

The mental attitude which best reflected the risk-laden world inhabited by those living off the sea was their belief in luck. A life at sea was synonymous with a life of chance. So to dream of the goddess Tyche, chance, standing upon a rolling ball is 'inauspicious for all men because of the precariousness of the base'. But a life dominated by chance is not necessarily a bad thing. So if in the dream Tyche is holding a rudder, it foretells movements: 'for a rudder that does not move is useless'.³⁸ The sea was a place where a great range of outcomes could occur, ranging from death to making a fortune. Indeed, from having nothing to landing a big catch was the occupational pattern of life on the sea. One anonymous collection of folk wisdom contains the story of some fishermen catching a stone. They were drawing a dragnet and since it felt heavy they danced for joy, thinking they had a great catch. But after they had drawn it to shore, they found that the net was full of stones and wood but few

fish. They became downhearted, angry not so much at what had happened as at their 'having expected the contrary'. The oldest one consoled the others in an attempt to revive their collective morale. 'Grief', he said, 'seems to be the sister of joy.' Or as the moral states, 'a fine day must necessarily be followed by a storm'.³⁹

Dealing with this seemingly inevitable cycle of chance created its own psychology, which enabled those living off the sea to cope better with the vicissitudes of this boom-and-bust context. This saw the notion of random chance replaced with the far more manageable and malleable idea of luck. Luck acted as the interface between man and the natural world upon which he relied for his living. So in the fable of the fishermen and the tunny fish, some fishermen put out to fish and, after struggling away for a long time without catching a thing, were just sitting dejectedly in their boat. At that point a tunny, 'swimming along in full flight with a great swish, leapt blindly into the boat'. The fishermen pounced upon it, rowed back to the city, and sold their catch. As the moral states, 'so it is that chance often bestows what skill cannot provide'.⁴⁰ To see this not as a random act of chance but as the deliberate favouring of luck reflects a world-view which sees the relationship between man and nature as being regulated by the gods. It turns the arbitrary and irregular into the intentional and purposeful. It is this view which the fact of having to earn a living from an uncertain and dangerous environment helped generate.

This outlook also reflected a belief that the world did not lie entirely at the mercy of Fate. Luck was a thing which could enable its possessors to improve their chances of survival in the risky world they inhabited. Synesius describes how the captain of the ship believed that it was his luck that allowed him to spot the coming storm and so escape from it. Luck in this outlook was something which could be influenced if not absolutely controlled. People involved in the sea, therefore, tried hard to get luck on their side. In the novel bearing their name, before Leucippe and Clitophon sailed from Alexandria, 'there were many hymns and prayers, invocations and moments of reverent silence, appealing to the seaman's gods to protect this our journey and make it truly auspicious'.⁴¹ Even after disaster had struck, sailors would take actions to ensure that their luck changed, or rather show that they deserved their luck to change because they had carried out the extreme acts vowed to the gods in the midst of the terror. So for seamen to dream that one's whole head has been shaved clearly signified shipwreck, 'for men shave after they have been involved in a shipwreck'.⁴²

Given that those who lived off the sea inhabited an environment

where injuries and deaths were commonplace, it was not surprising that they tried to do something to prevent these misfortunes from striking them. But it also reflects an optimistic view of the world, as a place that could be transformed by the actions of men. It was not simply man's lot to accept his fate with resignation. One fable tells how after a shipwreck, one man kept calling on Athena for help while the others swam away. One called to him, 'Move your hand to help Athena.' The moral spells it out: 'we must devote some thought and action to our own cause besides praying to the gods'. Nor was it enough to rely on hope. The fable of the hungry jackdaw, which sat on a fig tree waiting for the figs to ripen, made this clear. A passing fox said to him, 'You're a fool, my friend, to depend on hope. She'll lead you a merry chase, but she won't fill your stomach.'⁴³

But even if people could influence the outcome, it was carrying out acts of devotion towards the gods which made having good luck possible at all. Threat was an inbuilt part of the natural order, which could exert itself in an arbitrary and irregular way, but by attempting to nudge the gods in the right direction something positive might be achieved. The ancient ship, therefore, became a floating temple to luck. Various rituals were habitually carried out in an attempt to appease luck, win luck or compensate for a previous lack of luck. According to one tradition, nobody on board ship was allowed to cut his hair or nails except during a terrible storm.⁴⁴ It was considered bad luck to leave port on 24 August, 5 October or 8 November. Sneezing during embarkation foretold doom as did seeing a crow or magpie in the rigging. To dream of goats was bad, of owls meant storms or pirates, and of gulls signalled danger but not death. This did not reflect mere superstition. Life consisted in an endless repetition of the dangerous cycle of putting out to sea, fishing, and returning with whatever luck had granted. It was a world where little changed and so it made sense to try to win over the gods in a formulaic, repetitive way. It made sense to adhere to what had worked before, to reproduce what had been effective in the past, however limited that effect might seem to us. Custom was king.



Stone shop sign from a gambling house with four phalli and a dice cup.

Luck played a large part in how Romans understood risk.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

There were, though, limits to the degree to which luck could be influenced. In one fable, a sudden storm threatened to sink a ship. One of the voyagers tore his clothes and called on the gods with great weeping and wailing, promising to make thank-offerings if he was spared. When the storm died down again and the sea was calm, those on board danced and jumped for joy at having so unexpectedly escaped. But the helmsman, who was naturally a stern man, said to them, 'This is all very well, my friends, but our rejoicing ought to be regulated by the fact that we will have another storm if our luck runs that way.' As the moral stated, the fable 'teaches us not to be too elated at good fortune since we know the fickleness of fortune'.⁴⁵

Luck was also, in some sense, predetermined. As the saying went, 'the unfortunate can nowhere escape their misfortune'.⁴⁶ Luck would come

in its own good time, and the carrying out of proper ritual devotion and customary practices was simply the necessary precondition for it to come at all. And in reality, it would not be surprising if many on whom luck had failed to shine developed a far more fatalistic disposition. It would be easy in such a situation to see the success of another boat as being the result of its crew having manipulated demonic powers through magic. But for most, luck represented the bridge between man and success on the sea, while man himself was simply the medium through which luck brought about its desired ends. The boundary between what was the result of personal effort and what was the result of luck was therefore blurred. So it was with the canny old fisherman Tyrrhenos in *The Aethiopian Story*, who was 'so successful and always had such a good catch that his patiently acquired skills were generally taken for the favouritism of fortune'.⁴⁷

Luck played such a central part in popular thought because it explained the difference between actual, anticipated and hoped-for outcomes. Risk was an unavoidable part of life, but in response to that a culture developed that used beliefs and practices to mitigate the impact. Luck was reified, personified and seen as something that could be managed and possessed. Neurotic attempts at risk-avoidance would have made no sense given that life itself was full of dangers. Whereas we might expect individuals in such a situation to be overwhelmed and numbed by an overpowering sense of the risks their lives exposed them to, relying on the goodwill of the gods effectively insulated them from this sensation.⁴⁸ But belief in luck also negated the need to do anything to change the riskiness of their world. To rely on luck and to focus one's efforts on altering its path was implicitly to reject the notion that man could do much, if anything, about the nature of the risks themselves. Risk was an inbuilt part of the human landscape, which it was futile to try and change. Susceptibility to disaster was simply an aspect of the human condition. Luck was the factor that seemed to determine the outcomes of everyday experience. All that could be done was to try and drive bad luck away on to some other poor soul, a permanent battle of beggar-thy-neighbour tactics. Roman society placed certain people, often the ordinary people, in chronically dangerous circumstances. Seeing the disasters these groups then suffered as part of the natural order served to absolve the social order of blame.⁴⁹ Belief in luck helped wrap this unpalatable reality in a narrative that made it far easier to swallow. It allowed people to see themselves as part of a collective humanity that was itself storm-tossed in its attempts to survive. Like the heroes in the novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*, they lurched from one threat to another, being thrown about by life's vicissitudes, but still retained the hope that a happy

ending would eventually ensue.

Narratives of Disaster

Society can find it difficult to make sense of disaster. We have seen already the many different ideas that the Romans formulated to help them understand what had happened to them in various calamities. But such attempts at interpretation were never presented in a pure, unadulterated and objective form. The various reports of disasters, both real and imagined, that survive from antiquity all share one thing: they tell a story. They construct an account of terror that is carefully designed to lend meaning to, and even shape, the event. The events of disaster, therefore, were fitted in to a variety of narrative forms in order both to give them a purpose and to meet a purpose. We should also remember that these texts were intended for a Roman audience. They are as a result tailored to meet the expectations of this readership. There is no doubt that the Romans found disasters a fascinating subject. They thought disasters told them a great deal about their world: how well it was performing, how it compared with other periods, and, above all, what kind of moral qualities it possessed. So far in this book, I have concentrated on trying to see what really happened when disaster struck Roman society and how the Romans responded to that practically, intellectually and culturally. I want now to consider what might be termed the rhetoric of disasters.

The Uses of Fear

Societies employ what can be called ‘feeling rules’, which not only influence how individuals behave in stressful circumstances but tell them what and how they ought to fear.¹ This kind of culturally constructed template provides a set of guidelines and expectations for how people are expected to react in a disaster. As a result, people are more likely to approve of certain behaviours and be more sensitized to some problems than others. It provides a frame through which people understand and make sense of the often terrifying experiences they have undergone.² Often the frame is shaped by a strong ideological bias. Disasters can profoundly upset the prevailing system of meaning operating within a society, making what had seemed unshakeable seem fluid. As such, the unsettling experience of the disaster can provide an opportunity for texts with an ideological purpose to

attempt to convert people's sense of disorientation into a clearly focused fear. Reports from Britain about floods in the 1950s, for example, reflected the far stronger sense of community that existed then. Accounts therefore valorized the community, its resilience and its collective actions. Stories of individual suffering or individual acts of bravery were rare. It was the community network that was the real hero. Accounts of the time in newspapers had to fit people's cultural expectations of the news.³ This kind of disaster narrative employed a standardized story that could be applied to fit a wide array of calamities. But the strong focus on the resilience of the community also reflected a fear that Britain had lost something of the strength which had previously made it great. With Britain exhausted by the Second World War and suffering under the stringent austerity measures caused by its mountain of debt, the British media needed to reassure its audience that they were as a group still well up to the task of overcoming the difficult circumstances brought about by the floods and, by extension, the end of the British empire itself.

Roman society also had a formidable capacity to scare itself with cookie-cutter stories about disasters.⁴ Roman historians' descriptions of plague, for example, often overlap in ways which suggest stylization.⁵ Frequently, as we have seen, the outbreaks are called the 'worst ever' for literary effect, even though there was very little hard evidence to support such claims. The kind of features they report are that the disease was thought to come from the south or the east, that it created a crisis in army recruitment, that the impact could show strong social differences, that there were too many corpses to bury, that the corpses were so tainted that not even animals would touch them, and that the impact was so great that religious measures were taken to combat it.⁶ These were the types of characteristics which mattered to a Roman audience, above all that the disaster could have military and religious implications, reflecting the kind of militaristic, gods-fearing society in which they lived.

When we look at the ways in which Roman historians reported other types of disaster such as earthquakes, fires and floods, it becomes even clearer that the preoccupations of ancient authors differed greatly from those of a modern audience.⁷ In an analysis of five ancient historians – Thucydides, Diodorus Siculus, Livy, Tacitus and Cassius Dio – only a quarter of the accounts give a cause for the disaster. Nor is there any great attempt to define the disaster in terms of its duration or breadth of impact. By contrast, any modern media coverage of a significant urban fire, for example, would be expected to begin by focusing on the extent of the damage and what was likely to have caused it. The details that are reported in Roman accounts are

often sketchy at best, with the exception, to which we shall return, of Tacitus' account of the Great Fire in Rome. Despite the thinness of Roman descriptions, it is also the case that accounts tend to reflect the size of the impact in the degree of detail they provide. That is not to say that this detail provides much extra by way of factual information regarding the size of the disaster. Only 14 per cent of texts mention the physical extent and, remarkably to the modern ear, only 16 per cent record the number of casualties. Only 6 per cent talk of rescue work and only 2 per cent mention the social and economic consequences. Instead, there is more interest in reporting physical damage, especially to public buildings and property, with 42 per cent covering damage of this kind. Although accounts are less interested in the disaster experience from an individual point of view, there is a reasonable amount of reporting of the social disruption caused. This ranges from descriptions of the concomitant physical phenomena, such as the heat and noise (18 per cent), to the collective panic that resulted from the disaster (14 per cent). There is some interest in the community's reaction and suffering, with a small number of descriptions of the group shock, grief and anger that arose after the disaster. Similarly, there is interest in the public expectations of further disaster (10 per cent), the search for the guilty or for scapegoats (4 per cent), and the kind of rumours that circulated after the event (4 per cent).

Roman accounts are most interested in what can be gleaned from the disaster about the state of relations with the gods. This can take the form of descriptions of the divine anger that has caused the event (6 per cent), the carrying out of expiatory rites (6 per cent), and the consultation of oracles (6 per cent). By far the largest item of interest is the associated portents which have accompanied the disaster and so emphasize the divine nature of the happening (28 per cent). That various strange signs were reported to have occurred at the same time as the disaster was thought to underline the fact that the disaster should be given a religious interpretation and was a manifestation of divine anger at some particular human action. The seriousness with which these divine interpretations were taken is reflected in the fact that a significant number of accounts report that there was a change in government policy as a result of the premonitory disaster, such as the abandonment of a planned invasion (12 per cent). The importance that was given to public affairs, such as the damage to public buildings, is also seen in the amount of coverage given to public measures to help rehabilitate the afflicted community (18 per cent), and to the provision of measures to prevent a recurrence (6 per cent). Tacitus, in particular, frequently mentions the extent and form of

structural rehabilitation, which reflects his interest, not in the victims, but in Rome's leading politicians, men who saw disasters primarily as opportunities for impressive displays of governmental largesse.⁸

The problem with this kind of numerical analysis is that it creates a far too one-sided account of how Romans saw their disasters. It does give a good idea of the factors that were important to the particular writers of these texts and their readers, as well as highlight how differently the Romans viewed what was reportable in a disaster. But it also presents a small sample of elite texts as evidence for how all Romans interpreted catastrophe. The reality was more complicated. Disasters throw up competing claims for ownership. That is to say, various competing texts give different accounts of what were the most significant effects of a disaster. These alternative versions of the story represent rival ways of looking at society and about the importance of the damage that the event had caused. Often this disaster discourse reflects the politics of disasters. It is a battle to frame the account in such a way as to show certain sections of society in the best or worst possible light.

Disasters often highlight failings in the system. When a disaster, such as a famine, leaves thousands dead or dying from starvation it makes the vast gap separating the haves and have-nots painfully clear. Often, the response of those in authority is to try and reframe the disaster, so that it appears as a minor mishap, as not a disaster at all, or even as a victory. At the very least, the previous political system needs to be reasserted even if nothing is to change. The way that memories about disasters are constructed, therefore, reflects unresolved conflicts between different social groups.⁹ Disasters can cause such profound harm to certain sections of society that it is far harder for them to come to terms with the aftermath. It was easy for the elite Roman writers to think primarily about how disasters affected public buildings because that was the public sphere to which they devoted much of their lives: government and competitive benefaction, both of which either took place in, or involved the building of, large-scale public works. Why should we imagine for a moment that the many people who suffered physically in these events would have reported them in the same way? Their accounts might be expected to focus far more on the communal, familial or individual trauma they had suffered. What we need to do, then, when looking at Roman disaster reports is to try to construct a more polyphonic social memory, which takes into account some of these competing experiences.

The most obvious example of a polyphonic text is Tacitus' account of the various disasters that Rome suffered under the emperor Nero.¹⁰

Here we have an elite writer giving a version designed to highlight the failings of the then ruling regime. We have seen that Tacitus reflects elite interest in imperial largesse and rehabilitation. But he also places a unique emphasis on the victims and the horror of their collective experience. Whether it is the Great Fire in Rome, the collapse of the amphitheatre in Fidenae or the outbreak of pestilence in 65 CE, the detail of the victims serves to highlight the collective suffering of the people of Rome under Nero. The groups of victims act as a metonym for the Roman people as a whole. Tacitus' way of presenting disasters, therefore, is linked to his major thematic interests: above all, the use and abuse of imperial power. Nero's rule had been nothing short of a disaster for the Roman people and this was best seen in the various disasters which they suffered during this period. The Roman people are presented as united against a common foe, with those who have died actually having the benefit of escaping from the cruelty of Nero's autocracy. The breakdown in society that occurred in Athens during the plague in Thucydides' account is not evident in Tacitus' accounts. Instead the Roman people remain firm in their beliefs and constant in their morality. It is the crazily immoral actions of the emperor that are the true disaster, which culminate in the outbreak of a great fire in Rome immediately after the narrative of Nero's gay marriage.¹¹

But Tacitus' text was written for other members of the elite. The role of the people in his account is to shed light on the malpractice of high politics. It is reasonable to look for other concerns that the people may have had. That is not to say that the people necessarily disagreed with Tacitus' view of Nero. He reports that when a fierce fire occurred on the Caelian hill in Rome, the people blamed it on the emperor's decision to absent himself whilst under the influence of an evil star. He appears to have taken this gossip so seriously that he made a distribution of money in proportion to the loss each had sustained in order to stop it spreading.¹² After the Great Fire, Nero may well have sung of the destruction of Troy, but Tacitus tells us that he opened up his gardens to shelter the homeless, provided food and lowered the price of grain. All of this can be expected to have resulted in the positive appraisal by many of the emperor's disaster management. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Nero was popular with the majority of Romans. That popularity was based on meeting their material needs, on providing basic justice and on his common touch.¹³ For a long time after he died, some people used to adorn his statue with flowers.¹⁴ But not everyone liked him. Dio tells us that there was much merrymaking when Nero died, and people went about wearing the cap of liberty worn by freed slaves.¹⁵ These various popular reactions to the image of Nero should warn us against seeing

the people as responding in unison to imperial activities. The non-elite held multiple allegiances and they actively interpreted imperial behaviour according to their own individual priorities.

The degree to which a disaster is remembered is not simply a function of its magnitude and impact. Societal memory is contested and can be a source of conflict, primarily for the simple reason that it is often used to help justify the status quo. Elite Roman writers can be seen as trying to control the official version of events in order to maintain their own position at the top of society. What outraged Tacitus, after all, was the fact that someone as vulgar as Nero was in power, not that he mistreated the people. It was the fact that he did not behave like one of the elite that was the problem. Many of the people may well have seen the regular disasters they suffered as ample evidence of the incompetence of their leaders. Disasters can show up the powerlessness of government and so lead to a loss of legitimacy, if not of power itself. If the government loses legitimacy then the people will become less accepting or supportive of its demands. The government can respond by refusing to tolerate any other voice, meaning that the official record becomes monophonic and unrepresentative of the views of society as a whole. Public munificence carried out by the ruling elite in response to crisis, therefore, need not have been welcomed or appreciated. It could easily have been seen as a grudging act, designed simply to keep a lid on popular protests. The ever-present fear of disaster in many people meant that this could be an ongoing source of popular indignation and resentment. But the fear of government meant that they were largely only able to express their discontent silently. It was only through covert, anonymous actions such as burning down incompetent officials' houses or confronting them in the street en masse that public anger was ever able to assert itself.¹⁶

We can find some evidence for differences of opinion in how the Roman collective memory should be formulated. John of Ephesus tells us that the powerful earthquakes that hit Constantinople and Nicomedia in 550–1 CE (the correct date was 554) were commemorated in 'pain and tears of repentance' across the extensive and open plain, located seven miles from the capital city. Every year, many prayers were offered on the same days that the disasters had occurred. 'Collectively', he says, 'the whole city, so to speak, comes out to this plain for prayers.' But he adds a significant phrase, that 'some nobles do so earnestly'. It was not then quite the whole city that came out to perform these acts of collective remembrance. It was a more popularly centred event in which only some of the nobility were prepared to act in earnest. The rest, presumably, did not think it was an event that was worthy of such public memorial. Or they did not

wish to associate themselves with the common crowd. More violently opposed views of disaster can also be found. Herodian describes how during a fire in Rome, the entire possessions of some rich men were looted by criminals and the lower class, 'who mixed with the soldiers in order to do just this'.¹⁷ Sometimes the poor are portrayed as being completely uninterested in the disaster that is taking place around them. After a fire in Nicomedia, its governor wrote that 'it is generally agreed that people stood watching the disaster without bothering themselves to do anything to stop it'; 'it would not have spread so far but for the apathy of the populace'.¹⁸ In his eyes, this just showed how useless were the population and how in need of elite government. But perhaps in their eyes, doing nothing was a perfectly reasonable response: they may have had little or nothing to lose, so why risk their lives defending it; or perhaps it was mainly the public buildings that were affected, which they could expect the elite to replace at their own cost in any case. Regrettably, their version of events does not survive.

Elite disaster accounts show only indirect interest in the ordinary people. We have seen that disaster behaviour seems to have been an important part of the elite self-image and that Pliny's account of the eruption of Vesuvius highlights the calm self-control that he and his family members displayed. For a while, he had ignored the peril and instead sat reading. It was only when their house was on the verge of imminent collapse that they decided to leave town.¹⁹ This served to underline how differently most people behaved, since they were followed by a panic-stricken mob of people wanting to act on someone else's decision in preference to their own, 'a point', he adds dryly, 'in which fear looks like prudence'. The panic of the people serves merely as a backdrop to his elite self-control. The historian Tacitus had asked him for an account of what had happened some twenty-five years after the event, and Pliny comments, with aristocratic insouciance, that, 'of course these details are not important enough for history'. Indeed, he would not otherwise have bothered writing them down, because reporting details of the disaster was of no interest to him: 'if they seem scarcely worth even putting in a letter,' he says to Tacitus, 'then you have only yourself to blame for asking for them'.

Pliny's concern in his account was to make sure that his own and his own family's behaviour was shown to be in accordance with their high social status. More popular texts have their own ways of reporting and framing the disasters they suffered. The popular culture seems to have been a significant source of beliefs about disasters, whether in the form of predictions, folk legends or myths. Myth used stories of disaster in the form of great floods to account for evolutionary

change.²⁰ Folklore stories about the role of disasters in revealing the mythological past may also reflect something of the powerful role that disasters played in the life of ordinary people. Phlegon of Tralles' *Book of Marvels*, under the section 'Finds of giant bones', describes how in the Bosphorus there was a sudden earthquake, as a result of which one of several ridges in that region was torn open, displaying huge bones: 'the skeletal structure was found to be of 24 cubits'. Similarly, after an earthquake had revealed huge bodies in cracks in the earth, the locals sent to Rome a sample tooth, which was more than a foot long. These mythological beings seemed to represent something of the massive primeval power that once roamed in the chaos of that time. So the mythology concerning Mount Vesuvius held that the plain of Cumae had been inhabited by giants, 'the fame of whom had gone abroad for their lawlessness'.²¹

Perhaps more importantly, rumours circulating in the aftermath of disasters reveal the ways in which ordinary people created their own disaster stories, which seem to have differed markedly from elite versions. We have seen that popular rumours seem to have been rife after many disasters, but can be viewed as intensified information seeking, rather than as mere gossiping. During the Great Fire in Rome, we noted that the citizens ran about 'while assisting their neighbour', asking 'where?', 'how did it happen?', 'what started it?' These were very different kinds of questions to those asked by later elite historians, who were concerned more about the damage to public property that had been caused and what the event might be portending politically.²² People wanted to know who or what was responsible, reflecting a desire for simple justice and accountability. They wanted to know exactly where it had spread, so that they could decide what was their best course of action.

Popular rumours after disasters also took on a religious character. Although this reflected a similar notion of the divine interference in human affairs to that the elite held, it differed in that these rumours tended to be far more exaggerated and extreme in their prophecies. After one earthquake, Agathias describes how fantastic stories and extraordinary predictions to the effect that the end of the world was at hand began to circulate among the people. Charlatans and self-appointed prophets roamed the streets prophesying whatever came into their heads and terrifying still more the majority of the people, 'who were particularly impressionable because they had already become demoralised'. Still more ominous were the prognostications of those who pretended to be seized by a prophetic frenzy and possessed by some supernatural power, and claimed that they had learned the future from the demonic spirits that possessed them. Others pondered

over the motions and aspects of the stars, and hinted darkly at greater calamities to come, including what amounted almost to a cosmic disaster. As Agathias concludes, 'Society never fails to throw up a bewildering variety of such persons in times of misfortune.'²³ But whilst it is easy to mock with Agathias these prophets of doom, it was not surprising that popular versions of disaster took on such a terrible aspect. For one thing, the ordinary people were often hit hardest by disasters. The elite could avoid the worst of the deprivations of famine and had the resources to recover quickly from events such as floods and earthquakes. The other factor was that the non-elite made no pretence at the kind of self-restraint that Pliny practised during the eruption of Vesuvius. What benefit was it to the mass of the populace to put on an air of calm indifference? They stood to lose everything. Even more importantly, they would rely on the wealthy elite to provide some of the funds and patronage to help them recover these losses. There was no point in understating the size or impact of the disaster on them. They needed to bellow it out loud, with every detail writ large, to make sure that those in authority heard their anguish and deigned to do something to relieve it.

Other popular rumours often focused on the alleged hoarding of food by members of the elite. When food ran short, it seems to have been something of an automatic reaction for people to spread stories that certain wealthy individuals were keeping excessive amounts of food for their own household consumption. There was probably some truth to these rumours. It would have made sense in a period of shortage for those who had ample supplies to keep them back so that they had sufficient resources for their own extended households to be able to weather the crisis. The rapid price rises which shortage created also benefited those who had stocks in reserve and so again it benefited this minority to keep supplies tight. This must have been particularly galling to people who had good reason to believe that there was enough food to go round but found themselves and their families going hungry. A crowd once burned down the consul Symmachus' house for saying that he would rather use his wine for quenching lime-kilns than sell it at popular prices.²⁴ The rich were also condemned for deserting the city when grain and oil ran short.²⁵ Such widespread rumours and occasional acts of arson served as a way for the people to publicize their own version of the shortage, which focused on their lack of provisions and the elite's failure to help. It challenged the kind of elite disaster narrative which was most concerned with the impact a disaster might have on property and high politics. Popular accounts were expressed not in formal histories, but in rumours, everyday stories, common knowledge and whispered

questions. These all served to maintain the sense of grievance that the elite had failed to help them and so had to some degree lost legitimacy. It advertised the elite's failure to live up to their own self-image as patrons of the people.

Disaster as Metaphor

Disaster could serve as a useful rhetorical tool in the Roman world because it often functioned as a metaphor for wider social issues. Disaster seemed to represent a microcosm of political, social and moral disorder. The uses to which disaster was put in the various texts means, as we have seen, that we can never take an ancient disaster account at face value. It is laden with some of the class differences I have discussed above, and served to promote a particular social, political or religious agenda. The representation of disaster, therefore, often distorted the reality of what had happened, or had a focus that was concordant with a particular point of view. Disaster could be seen as being caused by natural causes, demonic possession, supernatural punishment, or as merited by personal or collective transgression. Each of these explanations could be used to push a certain view of how society should be ordered.

Disaster represented disorder and the world turned upside down. We saw that Tacitus' *Histories* starts with a list of the dreadful disasters that occurred during the period he is to cover in his work. It is a time of murdered emperors, wars both civil and foreign, revolts, volcanic eruption, and a great fire in Rome when 'her most ancient shrines were consumed by the flames'. Sacred rites were defiled, adultery was rife in high places, cruelty abounded, and the aristocracy was persecuted by informers who benefited by being given priesthoods and consulships as rewards for their treachery, rewards which had been the traditional reserve of those of high birth. It was a time of upheaval when all the old social certainties were thrown up in the air, when 'slaves were corrupted against their masters, freedmen against their patrons, and those who had no enemy were crushed by their friends'.²⁶

But disaster could also act as a more specific metaphor. Ancient providentialism could easily turn a natural disaster into a divine response to political events.²⁷ For Christian authors the arrival of the pagan Julian as emperor in 361 CE, some half a century after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, was nothing less than an unmitigated disaster. It threatened everything that had been achieved by the church in the fourth century. The Christian religion had been

transformed from a relatively obscure, localized, urban sect into the most powerful religion within the empire. Later Christian writers, like Sozomen, therefore had an urgent need to condemn the reckless folly of Julian's reign.²⁸ Even though the reign proved to be short-lived, it was imperative that its disastrous consequences be spelled out for posterity lest any other emperor be tempted to apostasize, or lest Christians should neglect the task of stamping out the remains of paganism that persisted in many places. God, Sozomen argued, 'gave manifest tokens of His displeasure, and permitted many calamities to befall several of the provinces of the Roman Empire'. God visited the earth with fearful earthquakes, tsunamis, a drought that was so oppressive that men were forced to eat the food usually eaten by animals, and a famine which introduced new and peculiar diseases.

But interpreting such disasters was a matter for contestation. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the great tsunami that struck during the reign of Julian the Apostate can also be seen as a counter-blast to these Christian texts, one which employed the tsunami as a metaphor for an alternative reading of human events. In response to Christian versions which see the tsunami as a divine response to Julian's paganism, the tsunami in Ammianus' text becomes a representative symbol, not just for Julian's reign, but for Roman history as a whole. The shipwrecks lying on the exposed seabed represented the vulnerability of the ship of state. The returning tidal wave acted as an omen for the flood of Gothic invaders who were to pour into the empire after the crushing Roman defeat at Adrianople in 378 CE. The tsunami, therefore, placed strategically at the end of the chapter before the account of the battle at Adrianople, can be seen as symbolizing the calamity of the state, marked by the death of Julian and that shattering defeat.

Sensing Disaster

Disasters acted as metaphors for extreme emotional states, for a lack of control and a breakdown in the proper social order. It is hard for us to appreciate how terrifying such a loss of hierarchy could be for many in Roman society. The rhetoric of disasters, therefore, is often concerned with the transgression of the normal limits of behaviour. It is when all the usual rules have been broken and the traditional social framework is falling apart. What we find in many disaster narratives is that this focus on disorder is reflected in a focus on the disordered senses. Disasters become an arena where even the usual rules of bodily comportment and sensorial order are overturned. Everything

that is abominable and repugnant to the senses comes to the fore.

Augustine gives us an idea of the dread there was among the populace of the physical suffering that disasters could inflict. 'What fear there is of the countless accidents that threaten the body from without – of heat and cold, storms, rain, lightning, thunder, hail, the bolt that strikes, earthquakes and chasms in the earth, of being crushed by falling buildings, or run down by frightened or even by vicious domestic animals.'²⁹ And when a disaster did occur, it is often the strong, overwhelming and disorienting sensory impressions that most strike the modern reader. So Pliny, describing the darkness that fell in the day as a result of the ash cloud emanating from Vesuvius, says: 'you could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices'.³⁰ Describing the darkness that followed an eruption of Mount Etna on Sicily, Cicero says that when the sun shone again after two days, the people 'felt as if they had come to life again'.³¹ The sensory confusion which disasters could generate seems sometimes to have spilled over into almost hallucinogenic fantasy. Dio's account of the eruption of Vesuvius of 79 CE records how some thought that the Giants were rising again in revolt, because many saw visions of them in the smoke and, moreover, 'a sound as of trumpets was heard'. Others believed that the whole universe was being resolved into chaos or fire and so they fled in fear.³²

The physicality of fear is perhaps best seen in Roman accounts of plague and its brutal effects. Accounts linger on the massive sensorial assault the disease launched on its victims: its vivid colours, dreadful stench, and the bitter cries of the sick.³³ The plague was 'a fearsome and terrible scene for onlookers', who had to gaze on piles of rotting, stinking corpses. The normally solid body liquefied. Streams of putrid matter flowed from the skin, the bowels and nostrils. The bellies of the afflicted were swollen and their mouths hung open, shedding putrefaction like rivers, and once they had died they lay where they fell, their eyes staring and their arms stretched far upward, in corners, streets, porticoes, churches, everywhere in fact because there was no one to bury them.

The fate of the body was particularly significant. White-haired old men were soiled by the putrefaction of their heirs, and beautiful girls and virgins, 'who were looking forward to their bridal feasts', lay discarded, shamefully exposed, and covered by the filth of the other dead. Handsome and cheerful boys turned black and, thrown in a heap, became 'an object of terror'.³⁴ The sufferers lost their identity,

and this was nowhere more evident than in the treatment that their bodies received when dead. When the plague of 541 CE started, people attended properly to the burial of the dead of their own houses. But soon the weight of numbers meant that they disposed of them by such means as throwing them into the tombs of others. Finally, 'confusion and disorder everywhere became complete'.³⁵ The dead were always marginal in Roman society and had to be buried outside the city confines. The idea that corpses could both pollute and contaminate was both practical and spiritual. The corpse was a powerful religious symbol to be honoured or dishonoured, to be punished or rewarded.³⁶ The plague rode roughshod over all these sophisticated notions. It attacked not only the individual body, but also the social body of the community and the mystical body of the church. All of the usual relationships between the sacred and the profane were severed, as rites and proper burials ceased. The plague, therefore, represented the inverted image of the good death. Instead of the associated private rituals of passing away, the sick were left to die publicly in the streets, alone. All ranks were afflicted in what amounted to a decomposition of the social body.³⁷

This loss of privacy reflected the terrifying destruction of domestic security. Extremes of sensory experience took place where there should have been normality and routine. The familiar became strange, the sick were often abandoned by their loved ones, and insecurity took hold of an environment which was normally safe. Procopius describes how people pitied greatly those who did stay and care for their family's plague victims, not because they were more likely to fall ill, when this did not seem to be the case, but because of the great hardships they were undergoing: 'For when the patients fell from their beds and lay rolling upon the floor, they kept putting them back in place, and when they were struggling to rush headlong out of their houses, they would force them back by shoving and pulling against them.'³⁸ The home became a place of terror and violence, and whilst a certain degree of forcible coercion had always been an element of Roman family life, this was of a wholly different order. People lost their sense of being joined to the place and location where they lived, and to lose this sense of spatial connectedness was a terrifying event in the highly structured world of the Roman empire. It cut them off from the social ordering of society itself.

Disaster Narrative and Morality

The sensory extremes created by disasters spoke, therefore, of far

larger issues. The physical wreckage caused by the plague and similar pestilences served to lay bare the corruption of the body politic. The Christian historian Eusebius gives an account of a famine which was accompanied by the plague and 'other disease'. This other affliction caused horrible ulcers, which on account of their fiery character were called anthraxes, an anthrax being a precious stone of a dark red colour. These spread over the entire body of its victims and, by marking out the eyes for special attack, it blinded many. What was particularly significant for Eusebius was that this outbreak occurred at a time when the pagan emperor Maximin had declared war on the Armenians, long-time allies of Rome and, most importantly, devout Christians. It is for Eusebius a delicious irony that the 'tyrant' Maximin used to boast that his devout paganism had meant that 'neither famine nor pestilence nor even war took place in his time'.³⁹ Instead the physical corruption of society was reflected in the fact that a non-Christian rot had set in at the top. The social body bore the stain of its leader's spiritual corruption.

Disaster, therefore, could be seen as an event that reflected a moral contagion at work in society. The disease became an expression of the failings of the inner character of the emperor. This, at least, is what the Christian Eusebius wanted his readership to think. He used the physical excesses of his account to highlight what he saw as the decadence and immorality of the current pagan regime. Disasters, therefore, could be an extremely useful tool for moralists to elucidate their view of what constituted the socially normal. By dwelling on the extremes of abnormality often thrown up by the disaster event, they could generate a strong sense of how society should be run. It also served as a powerful warning to those who might be tempted to follow in the path of 'immorals' like Maximin. It stated that the best way to avoid the great suffering of disaster was to follow a life of moderation and sobriety. Good behaviour offered a moral inoculation against the dangers of sin, and an effective prophylactic against the further dangers they would otherwise inevitably bring. Who exactly was behaving immorally was, however, a matter for great debate. For Christians it was clearly the pagans. For those in authority it made more sense to see the victims as somehow deserving their suffering on account of their apathy or disloyalty. But for all, it was important to construct a carefully painted picture of the victim's morality to make plain the degree to which they deserved their fate.



Famine and epidemics often resulted in eye problems. Votive offerings such as this were made to the gods to ask for their help in curing them.

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Similarly, disaster could also provide a great opportunity for certain groups to display what they saw as their own superior morality. We saw earlier how the emperor Titus, after a fire in Rome, made no remark except 'I am ruined', implying that it was as much his personal loss as that of his subjects. Likewise, we are told that during the several disasters that took place during his reign, including the eruption of Vesuvius and a plague, he showed 'not merely the concern of an emperor, but even a father's surpassing love'.⁴⁰ Providing for his recovering 'children' gave an emperor a means of establishing an image of Roman society based on the family. Titus was certainly not the first emperor to do this. The first emperor himself, Augustus, had turned to the family image to help him define the nature of his rule. The metaphor of the emperor as father helped to spell out the form that social obedience should take, and also justified the threat and use of corrective punishment. The image therefore served to display imperial power, enforce domination and construct community. It articulated the aspirations of the regime: to be at the head of a well-ordered, interconnected and contented society. But above all, it advertised and asserted the new form of government's moral right to rule. The image of the moral family provided a language to express the new kind of hierarchical relationship that now existed between an

emperor and his people.

The metaphor of the family group pulling together under such paternal leadership during a disaster also provided a means of judging 'bad' emperors. It was a side-effect of the family image that it created, in effect, a grammar of disaster behaviour: the correct rules that should properly be followed by those in authority when their peoples were afflicted. The way emperors behaved during calamities provided powerful evidence for the inextricable link between comportment and morality.⁴¹ So when Nero made his singing debut in Naples, it was telling that he did not stop singing the number he had begun even though the theatre was shaken by a sudden earthquake. By contrast, the meticulous Claudius took pains to observe scrupulously the custom of having the praetor call an assembly and proclaim a holiday whenever there was an earthquake in the city.⁴² How emperors acted during times of crisis told Romans something far more significant about the nature of their regimes. It told them the degree to which emperors were fulfilling their part of the bargain established by the creation of the family image. It served as another example of how the language of the disaster could be used to talk about and connect with wider social concerns and cultural preoccupations. In the search for metaphoric solutions to the problems of why disasters happened, disasters became firmly linked to ideas of immorality. In the same way that after a disaster it was important to assert positive moral values publicly in ceremonies and rituals, so it was vital to establish the link with the underlying immorality that had originally been its cause.

Christian Disaster Narratives

Christians relished disaster stories just as much as, if not even more than, pagan Romans. Whether it was accounts of the great plague, or the sack of Rome, or homilies on famine, Christian writers regularly turned to disasters as a subject for their texts. I want in this final section to think about what attractions such a grim topic held for these authors and their audiences. To begin with, Christianity had, if anything, an even more moralized notion of disaster than did traditional pagan religion. Disaster represented nothing less than the just punishment that was appropriate to the sins of the victim. Narratives of disaster offered a simple and straightforward lesson in the terrible correction that God could be expected to mete out to the sinful if they did not repent of their ways. Augustine describes the horror that fear of destruction could cause in a city. All the inhabitants were very tense and in great fear, expecting to be

destroyed. A fiery cloud approached from the east, small at first, and then it gradually grew as it approached the city, until it hung, terrible and huge, above the whole city. Horrid streamers of fire were seen to hang from the sky, and the stench of sulphur was present also. Not surprisingly, everyone took refuge in the churches, which ‘couldn’t hold the multitude’. Everyone was asking for baptism from anyone they could. Not only in church, but ‘in houses, streets, and squares, the saving sacrament was being demanded’.⁴³ Disasters represented a way for God to coerce His chosen people into proper behaviour. This was not always an easy task. As with the great plague, the angel whom God had placed in charge over the pestilence ‘had to struggle with people until they despised all the matters of the world’.⁴⁴ It was all part of God’s plan for humanity that would reach its inevitable fruition on Judgement Day.

Disaster provided the perfect accompaniment for such a teleological outlook. Mass death, famine, plague and earthquakes all provided moral signposts along the long, hard road towards salvation. The whole purpose of writing history for some Christian authors was to show how the increasing numbers of disasters signalled that the final day was approaching. For John of Ephesus, it was disasters that were often the most noteworthy features of history. His text was itself organized as a straightforward chronicle of the terrible events that marked the relentless march of humanity towards its ultimate judgement. He states that his accounts were written as a token of remembrance for the terrible events he had witnessed. But such remembrance had a purpose. His accounts were ‘a record for future generations, so that when they hear about our punishment and about the judgement of our sins – fools and provokers that we were – they will learn ... and will repent and implore mercy at all times, lest this punishment should also be sent against them’.⁴⁵

Stories of disaster also provided Christian writers with a simple metaphor for the tortures of hell. John’s account of the collapse of Antioch in an earthquake in 526 CE reads like a foretaste of the eternal punishment that awaited those who did not take such earthly disasters as a warning sign:

A punishment came from heaven so severe and harsh that fire caught those who were fleeing ... Sparks flew and burned up whatever they landed on. Even the innards of the earth were boiling up from below the ground, burning and devouring all that was there ... The foundation and all the storeys above them jumped high into the air, then came down and crashed, crumbled, fell and burned. As for those who escaped and sought to flee, fire met them, ignited them and

consumed them; and they burned like wood. Tongues of fire burned terribly and ferociously with intense fury. Furthermore, the flame was coming down like rain from heaven.

Similarly, his account of a tsunami that struck after a powerful earthquake on the coast of Lebanon in 551 CE becomes a metaphor for the ultimate destruction of unrepentant sinners. The quake was so strong that 'the sea retreated and drew back for about 2 miles, all along Phoenicia'. Thus 'the awesome depths of the sea became visible', along with sunken ships laden with various cargoes and settled on the seabed. God had sent this 'terrible disaster' in order to shock people, 'so that it might lead them to grief and repentance'. But Satan had hardened their hearts and the coastal dwellers, 'with determined insolence', rushed into the sea to pillage the impressive, hidden treasures that lay at the bottom of the sea, 'because of the beguiling avarice that was destroying their lives'. Tens of thousands of people, gripped with this fatal passion, rushed to the seabed and began to carry off the treasures; then, 'at an invisible sign', the 'immensity of the terrible sea suddenly ran to return to its former depths'. But while the people were trying to escape, a severe earthquake occurred, which shook the buildings of the cities. They collapsed and crushed those who fled from the sea and 'not one of them survived'. 'For when the sea rose up against them from behind, the earthquake shook the city before them. Because of their evil avarice, they were caught in the middle of two horrors.'

Disaster stories such as these provided Christian writers with a pool of terrible tales with which to try and uphold community values.⁴⁶ Danger was, in effect, Christianized, and become part of the tool-kit with which God could fashion His will on earth. Such use of disaster as a moral weapon was nothing new in the Roman world. The Romans had long since moralized danger. But the strongly teleological Christian view of disasters meant that it took a far more prominent place in their rhetorical armoury. Immoral behaviour by the individual could unleash a disastrous attack on the whole community. The threat of communal pollution and punishment through the great sins of the few meant that disasters were able to be deployed as a weapon for social coercion. By interpreting and representing disasters as signs of reprehensible behaviour, Christian moralists were able to take full advantage of the opportunities they provided for defining blameworthiness. Their disaster accounts became akin to crime stories with a just sentence at the end to show that moral rectitude had been upheld. The rhetoric of blame attribution therefore helped bind the individual more tightly into the Christian community. These disaster stories became a way of articulating the moral struggles that took

place within the individual as a social drama that had implications for the wider social order.

Christians were, of course, divided in matters of belief and conduct, and these divisions feature in disaster accounts as generating and accentuating peril. Disaster, in other words, provided a simple metaphor for the error of heresy. So when in 526 CE Antioch collapsed during an earthquake, and 'from the depth of the earth wet soil boiled up', John of Ephesus describes how in the aftermath, the body of the heretical bishop, Euphrasius, was found in a cauldron of pitch that sat beneath his episcopal residence. When the palace had collapsed, he had happened to fall into the cauldron. His whole body sank in the cauldron and was boiled by the pitch itself, but his head was exposed, having caught on the cauldron's rim. And thus, John triumphantly tells us, his identity was revealed from his face, 'while his bones were found bare because of the pitch'. So far this is a simple tale of divine retribution for the sin of heresy. But the struggle for ownership of the disaster story meant that the story took a new twist. Euphrasius' followers spread the word that their bishop had in fact been carried away to heaven. That, John asserts, is actually why God had preserved the face unharmed, as if he were alive, in order to expose the deception. Fear and terror seized all those who saw his face as they recalled the 'grave wickedness' he had wrought in pursuing his heretical beliefs.

Disasters also served as a way of highlighting the benefits that Christianity could bring. Texts on famine and plague not only showed the punishment of sin, but also advertised the many practical ways in which the church could help through its patronage. By acting to generate stronger communal bonds, disasters established a duty of charity between the different members of that community. Basil of Caesarea's texts on famine and poverty blame his flock for causing the disaster on account of their avarice, usury and immorality. But the poor are brought to social consciousness by a deliberate construction of 'fictive kinship' between themselves and the better-off. Disasters were a great benefit for the rich because they gave them the opportunity to gain redemption for their own sins by helping their poor and suffering brethren.⁴⁷ Disasters therefore became an important way for Christians to establish their own identity, as givers of charity at times of crisis. When the need was greatest, a communal reassertion of shared values proclaimed the power and unity of the Christian community. It served, in some ways, to replace the tales of martyrdom from when the empire was still pagan. Telling stories of Christian charity served to promote unity and assert the enduring values of the group.

What was it about the disaster metaphor that lent itself so well to the Christian Roman empire of late antiquity? One answer might be that it suited a society in which a more all-encompassing form of authority and more penetrating form of government had generated a conflictual model of social relations. Individual struggle in the face of overwhelming force provided a parallel for the powerless individual in the face of the enlarged Roman state that had emerged in response to the third-century crisis. Disaster also served to represent the great social upheavals that the later empire brought, from barbarian invasions to the decline of paganism. Within the context of the new political realities of the later empire, the disaster image may have reflected the fact that imperial government had to establish its claim to legitimacy before a wide range of social and religious groups. To this end, the Christian state reaching out to the weakest provided a powerful image. The message for pagans was that Christian government brought material benefits for all levels of society; and for Christians that the compromises which proximity to secular power had brought were worthwhile.

For Christians, disaster provided a meaningful image of the all-encompassing Christian relationship. The importance of charity as a concept and institution in the later empire reflected a society in which inequality in social relations was the norm. Differences of wealth and status were the lifeblood of charity and both thrived in the later empire. But the bonds of patronage that the charitable relationship established between donor and recipient were, in the context of a disaster, shown to be not only most useful but also able to withstand even the toughest of stress tests. Christian charity was something which could be relied upon to deliver in even the darkest hour. And for individual Christians, the image of disaster provided a metaphor for their own weakness in the face of the enormity of temptation that waited in the earthly realm to ensnare them. The Christian soul faced a Satanically sent tsunami of sin, and it was only with the help of the church and its leadership that the soul had any hope of escaping from it and attaining salvation.

The disaster metaphor may also have held attractions for the non-elite. It reflected the concrete reality of the riskiness of daily life and reduced it to readily understood personal terms. Disaster stories also appealed to the popular taste for the unexpected, for spectacle and for the grotesque. These stories juxtaposed horror and heroism, death and survival, darkness and light, wreckage and renewal. This process represented a popularization of the Christian message, which was partially reshaped to conform more to popular tastes. Such a reshaping of the message was vitally important if Christianity was to

get out among the people and win them over as converts. Paganism was still strong in many areas. More importantly, what the people most ardently needed in the vertiginous world of the late empire was to have patrons who could get things done. Only by having links to the powerful elite in society could the common man hope to alleviate the extra burdens of taxation and service which the later empire had inflicted upon him. The disaster image appealed widely, therefore, because it held out the hope that some kind of desire still existed among the powerful for broad social solidarity. The people could rely on the wealthy to help them in times of crisis, to give something back, not so much now through the provision of public amenities and entertainments, but through the institution of Christian almsgiving.

The reality was, of course, very different. Christian charity was a highly selective procedure that reached only a fortunate few.⁴⁸ But the ideal of Christian disaster relief enabled the religious and secular elites of the later empire to forge links with those right down at the basest levels of society. Like true, caring fathers they took an interest in every intimate detail of their offspring's lives. Images drawn from disasters therefore succeeded in expressing the depth of these new bonds to those at both ends of the social chain. To wealthy almsgivers the disaster image emphasized their place at the head of this new Christian society; to the poor recipients the image showed that their lowly status did not mean they had no stake in that world. The disaster image served to reunite the two ends of Roman society after they had drawn away from each other in the aftermath of the third-century crisis. This image, therefore, was not simply an awe-inspiring picture of shock and terror. It expressed an urgent need to show that the new political system worked in practical and concrete ways to the potential benefit of all members of society.

Such vigorous use of the disaster metaphor also shows how hard Christian leaders had to work to win the people over and then keep them on their side. For we should remember that in the fourth century there were always religious alternatives available, which provided people with different means of obtaining such practical help. Paganism, magic and Christian heresies all offered other religious solutions to practical problems. We are justified in asking whether people tried to resist or subvert this cosy image of Christian disaster relief. Its use by those in authority could be something of a two-edged sword, since it created an ideal they could not always live up to. Emperors and bishops might well have encouraged the people to believe in their benign paternalism, but in doing so they created an image that could itself be turned against them. It could become what Scott calls a 'weapon of the weak'.⁴⁹ Once an ideal had been

established, every claimant to leadership could be judged against it. And knowing what the attributes of an ideal Christian leader were gave ordinary Romans a way of thinking about the degree to which the reality fell short. The neat social order that was expressed in images of disaster relief was far from evident in all Roman crises. The empire mostly failed to meet its own claims of communal aid and good governance, the Christian church its ideals of charity. It is tempting to think that the further the government and the church fell short of their own self-proclaimed standards, the more they needed to turn up the rhetoric of their public statements to assert that everything was in fact all right.

The importance of the disaster image within the later empire, therefore, may well be that it papered over the widening cracks between the classes and concealed the powerlessness of the poor. It reflected the fact that social structures and relationships were becoming ever more hierarchical. In order to understand that change, people turned to easily accessible metaphors such as the individual in crisis, in the extreme context of a disaster. The centrality of images of disaster relief in the later sources clearly cannot simply be seen as a result of an increase in paternal feelings among the elite towards the poor. Such images reflected areas of tension in a society that was undergoing significant structural shifts and needed both to understand and explain such developments to its members. People needed to be able to gain access to those who had influence in this hierarchical world, but they also needed to be able to make sense of their own diminished place within it. Being a Roman citizen did not in itself give any access to power or provide individuals with the possibility of material aid. In the late Roman empire, survival depended on recognizing the impotence of the individual and the need to establish a subordinate relationship with those in authority, whatever the consequences of this dependence.

Conclusion

Certain disasters and certain aspects of disaster are over-privileged in the Roman historical record. The disaster accounts that have survived tell us more about the recorder's preoccupations than they do about the social and economic reality. Whether it was the Great Fire in Rome acting as a metaphor for the disastrous nature of Nero's eccentric rule, at least as Tacitus saw it, or later Christian accounts of famine and plague, all these dreadful events gave their historians a golden opportunity to push their own ideological agenda. The disaster

context provided a backdrop of humans acting under extreme pressure, facing the gravest dangers and struggling to overcome the severest difficulties. Disasters showed up human qualities and characteristics in their purest and most exaggerated form. But lest we in the modern world feel smug about our own 'objective' assessment of the significance and impact of disasters, we should bear in mind that this too has an ideological slant. 'Vulnerability' can itself be seen as a western discourse that helps to keep the rest of the world weak and subordinate.⁵⁰ A country that is vulnerable is constructed as a dangerous 'other' place, a place needing interference and help. It is a way of rendering the world unsafe. Western disaster discourse then becomes a justification for external, western interference in the affairs of the rest of the world, without attempting to redress the imbalances that have often been the underlying cause of the disasters. The recipients of this aid are portrayed as childlike in their incapacity for self-help. They need the superior skill and wealth of the west to recover, making them seem weak and passive. This is not to deny that disasters happen and are very real events, not just rhetorical constructs. But disasters always take place within a specific social, political and cultural context, and as such reflect the inequalities and power structures of that setting. I have argued that a culture of risk existed in Rome, in which exposure to threat was a chronic characteristic of the system. The Romans did not perceive hazard in the same way as we do. For them it was simply a part of life that had to be coped with. It was the fact that disasters allowed such rich opportunities for the powerful to reinforce such an unfair system that made them so rhetorically useful.

Inflicting Catastrophe

The battle of Cannae, which took place in the dusty heat of summer in the south-east corner of Italy in 216 BCE, was still famous among the Romans as a disaster more than three and a half centuries later. Outwitted and outflanked by the Carthaginian general Hannibal, the Romans had imagined that they had been surrounded by hostile cavalry and troops. So they turned and broke into headlong flight. In the few hours between the second hour of the day, about eight o'clock in the morning, and the second hour before nightfall, 50,000 Roman soldiers were slaughtered and a great many taken prisoner. Even the first day of the battle of the Somme saw only 20,000 British dead. Hannibal himself was overcome at the scale of the carnage. Immediately after the battle he went to view the dead, and when he saw the bravest of his friends lying among them, he lifted up his voice and wept, exclaiming that he did not want another such victory.¹

Warfare was the ultimate man-made disaster in antiquity. It could decimate the male population; it ripped apart families and could have a devastating effect on civilians through sieges and famine. With warfare an almost permanent feature of the political and international landscape, Rome's militaristic society kept large sections of its male youth in the service of the legions and made full use of them to expand its influence across the Mediterranean region and beyond. On the whole, the balance sheet of victories and defeats found the Romans running up a considerable surplus over the centuries. Defeats like Cannae were, from the Roman point of view, mercifully rare. But one people's triumph is another's disaster. Rome's success almost habitually inflicted disasters on others. The mass slaughter of Gauls by Caesar's armies, the brutal destruction of great cities such as Carthage and Jerusalem, and the impact of warfare on agriculture, commerce and demography were also all part of the history of disasters in Rome. In this chapter, I consider what such momentous military events can tell us about how the Romans thought of disasters, even if they generally saw them only from their own point of views as the victors, and so filed them under the heading of 'triumph'.

Defeat and Disaster

Disasters and warfare were conceptually linked in the Roman mind. The importance that military action had in dictating the course of future events in antiquity meant that it seemed natural for the gods to make their views known in the course of a battle. At that earlier Roman defeat at the hands of Hannibal, at Lake Trasimene, a violent earthquake coincided with the beginning of the engagement, ‘unless’, we are told, ‘it was the rush of horses and men and the unusually violent clash of arms which caused this trembling of the earth’. The rash Roman commander should have realized that this divine sign gave warning of the impending disaster.² But, of course, we have seen that interpreting natural events such as earthquakes was never a simple matter. So Pliny’s account of the same battle tells us that the fighting at Trasimene was so intense that the earthquake was ‘not noticed by either side’.³ Or when the Roman consul Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was engaged in battle with the Picentines in 268 BCE, a sudden earthquake threw both sides into panic as each interpreted it as a portent of their own imminent doom.⁴ The disorder and chaos which a disaster like a volcanic eruption could generate might also be best described by comparison with the wild vicissitudes of battle. The poem *Etna* warns that when the start of an eruption is announced by a deep rumbling underground accompanied with fire, then you should flee in panic and watch the divine event from the safety of a hill:

For on a sudden the conflagration blazes out, loaded with its spoils; masses of burning matter advance; mutilated lumps of falling rock roll forth and whirl dark shoals of sand. They present vague shapes in human likeness – some of the stones suggest the defeated warrior, some a gallant host armed for a standing fight, unassailed by the flames; on one side pants the enemy unwearied and deploys his forces, on another the breath of fury wanes, even as when an army, vanquished in the victor’s joyous triumph, lies prostrate on the field right to the gates of the camp.⁵

Panic leading to disorder and loss of organization were what could turn a military defeat into a disaster. At Cannae, it had been the fact that the Roman troops had panicked when attacked from the sides and the rear. ‘As usually happens in cases of disorder and panic, they considered their condition worse than it was’, and so they turned and broke into headlong flight.⁶

Many centuries on lay the military disaster that was Adrianople.⁷ On another August day, in 378 CE, in what is now European Turkey, the united Gothic tribes of the Tervingi and the Greuthungi under the command of King Fritigern, engaged with the Romans in open battle.

Routing their cavalry, they exposed the massed ranks of Roman heavy infantry at the heart of their force to an attack from the flank. Two-thirds of the Roman force was killed, perhaps 10,000 or even 20,000 men. So bad was the disaster that even the emperor Valens was killed, though his body could not be found. It is this feature that we find repeatedly in the accounts of the worst Roman military defeats. To the Roman historian, in this case Ammianus Marcellinus, it was the loss of the emperor and the leading elite that turned defeat into disaster. He dwells on the differing accounts of the emperor's death. One version had it that the badly wounded Valens was taken by his bodyguard and a few eunuchs to a peasant's cottage nearby. There, as he was being treated, he was surrounded by the enemy, but was saved from the shame of captivity because the Goths did not realize who was in the building. They piled bundles of straw and firewood about the house, set fire to them, and burned it, men and all. When they heard who had been inside from one of the bodyguard who managed to escape, the Goths were filled with sorrow at being cheated of great glory in not having taken the ruler of the Roman empire alive.

Roman historiography was an elite pastime which had more to do with rhetoric than the objective pursuit of the truth. Writers like Ammianus saw the world through elite eyes, and it seemed natural to explain success or failure in terms of the personal, heroic qualities of the Roman or enemy leadership. Just as it was Hannibal's military genius that was portrayed as bringing about the Carthaginian success of six hundred years earlier, so at Adrianople it was Valens' impetuosity that left the Romans hopelessly outnumbered. The story that he ended up in a peasant's cottage unrecognized by his attackers parallels Ammianus' opinion of him as a military commander: of poor quality and inconspicuous. Similarly, it was the loss of elite life in defeat that often acted as an index of the scale of the defeat. Both the disasters at Cannae and Adrianople were notable because so many of the aristocratic leadership fell. At Cannae, we are told that 'many Roman senators who were present lost their lives and with them all the military tribunes and centurions, and their two best generals'. At Adrianople, Ammianus singles out from the 'manifold loss of distinguished men' the deaths of Trajanus and Sebastianus, of thirty-five tribunes, as well as Valerianus and Aequitius, who ran the imperial palace in Constantinople, the one being in charge of the stables, the other of the palace. He also notes the loss of Potentius, who died 'in the first flower of his youth'. He was a tribune, 'respected by all good men and honoured both for his own services and for those of his father Ursicinus, formerly a commander-in-chief'. This was the kind of young leader who came from a family of officers, and so

represented something of the great tradition of Roman military culture. In Ammianus' eyes, Adrianople was the later empire's Cannae, a comparison he himself directly makes: 'The annals record no such massacre of a battle except the one at Cannae', and his account is structured to bear some similarities to that earlier disaster. Above all, it is the loss of elite leadership which has left the Romans in such a parlous state. In a vicious circle of failure, it is poor leadership that creates disorder, which leads to disaster, which leads to loss of leadership.

I have argued that disasters can act as metaphors for a breakdown in the proper social order and that this is often reflected in the concern that disaster narratives have for the way that normal sensory perceptions are overturned. Disasters become a place where the senses were thrown into disarray. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Roman accounts of military disaster. Indeed, the degree of sensory disorder seems to parallel directly the magnitude of the military disaster that is unfolding in the text. Ammianus' account of Adrianople carefully constructs a sensory overload to reflect the inability of the Roman infantry forces to bear the weight of the Gothic attack. Deserted by their cavalry, the foot soldiers were so hard pressed by the numbers of the barbarians that they could barely move and 'hardly anyone could pull out his sword or draw back his arm'. Clouds of dust filled the air, which 'echoed with frightful cries'. So thick was the dust cloud that they could not see the arrows that whirled in death from every side. The groans of the dying and of those who had suffered deep wounds caused immense fear among the surviving combatants. The battle becomes a metaphor for the disruption that the military disaster was to cause in the wider Roman world. Even basic norms of seeing and hearing are transformed. It is not just individual Romans who were dying on this battlefield; a whole tradition was being extinguished.

The consequences of military defeat spread far beyond the theatre of war itself. After Rome's defeat at Trasimene, everything was thrown into confusion. At first people relied on word-of-mouth reports for information. People gathered together in the forum, with mothers anxiously asking anyone they met for news of the rumoured disaster. The crowd called on officials to tell them what had happened. Eventually, shortly before sunset, Marcus Pomponius, the praetor, came out and solemnly made the announcement that 'We have been defeated in a great battle.' No further details were forthcoming and people continued to rely on the rumour-mill for their information. They became 'full of the rumours which they had caught from each other'. The stories of horror seemed to multiply like some virulent

disease. Some had heard that the consul, with a great part of his troops, was slain; others reported that only a few of the Roman army had survived. In a neat parallel between the confusion at home and on the battlefield, Livy tells how there were as many anxieties in the minds of the legionaries' relations back home as there had been calamities in the vanquished army. For days, a crowd of men and women stood at the city gates, waiting for intelligence of their loved ones' fate, and earnestly interrogating anyone who entered from outside.⁸ All of the usual certainties of family life had gone.

Defeat brought religious instability. Military failure necessarily implied that the *pax deorum* had ruptured, meaning that remedial action was urgently required. It was imperative to ascertain whether the breakdown in Rome's felicitous relationship with the gods was temporary, or of a more lasting nature. So after Cannae, the magistrates 'besought the gods by sacrifices and prayers that if they had any cause of anger they would be satisfied with the punishment already visited'.⁹ The senate also sent Quintus Fabius to the temple of Delphi to seek an oracle concerning the present situation. Sending an envoy to Greece in this way was like seeking the support of a divine UN. The Romans wanted assurance that their city could rely on the backing of the gods' powers and that their actions continued to have moral force.

One practical consequence of defeat was to disrupt normal military recruitment procedures. The loss of substantial numbers of trained legionaries in a military disaster meant that Rome needed to source new recruits from anywhere it could. So after Cannae, they freed 8,000 slaves with their masters' consent, and ordered everybody in the city to go to work making arms and projectiles. Similarly, in the second century CE, the emperor Marcus Aurelius was forced by the ravages of a great plague to train slaves for military service, as well as arming gladiators, hiring German auxiliaries and 'turning even the bandits of Dalmatia into soldiers'.¹⁰

An unintended consequence of the siege of Amida in the sixth century CE was that warfare changed the behaviour of the local fauna. After the war was over, wild animals began to attack humans. This was because the war itself had produced large numbers of corpses resulting from the various battles, which the animals had grown accustomed to feeding on. They therefore developed a taste for and an addiction to human bodies, so that once the war had finished and the corpses of the dead had rotted away, these animals were left with a craving for human flesh. They would go right into the villages, seize children and eat them. They would also attack solitary men on the

roads and mangle them. So frightened did people become that during the harvest season no one in the whole region would spend the night on his threshing floor without a hut at hand, for fear of attack by some savage beast.¹¹

Siege warfare turned a purely military matter into a domestic disaster. When in the early fifth century CE Alaric the Goth laid siege to Rome, he prevented the transmission of all provisions into the city. After the siege had lasted some time, famine and pestilence made ‘fearful ravages in the city’. Under this added pressure, many of the slaves deserted to Alaric’s side. The usual structure of property ownership was buckling under the strain of external assault. Most of the barbarians within the walls also went over to Alaric as normal ethnic relations disintegrated. By this time, Rome was a largely Christian city but those senators who still adhered to paganism proposed to offer sacrifices in the Capitol and the other temples. A group of Tuscans promised to drive out the barbarians with thunder and lightning, claiming that they had performed a similar exploit at Larnia, a city of Tuscany, which Alaric had bypassed on his way to Rome, and so had not captured. But the Christian city refused to turn back towards what they saw as superstition. Instead, they interpreted the dreadful situation as an indication of divine wrath, sent to chastise them for their luxury, debauchery and manifold acts of injustice towards each other. It was, in other words, time to wheel out the kind of emergency doctrines which Christianity reserved for dire situations of this kind.¹²

Thankfully, for the Romans, Alaric could be bought off, at least for a while. But warfare often generated high casualty rates among civilians. Famine frequently resulted from disruption in food supplies or from an army’s simply taking what they needed from the local population. Siege warfare could completely destroy normal civilized life. When the Romans besieged the city of Amida in 504–5 in an attempt to regain it from the Persians, those inside suffered a severe famine, those that is who had not been slaughtered by the Persians on their capture of the place. The Persians had tied up all the city’s men and imprisoned them in the amphitheatre, because they feared that they would deliver the city back to the Romans. Many died of hunger or from the side-effects of extended imprisonment. The women were forced into eating stones, old soles and ‘other horrible things from the streets and squares’.¹³ Some were forced to turn to prostitution to survive, and the Persian soldiers gave them some of their provisions in return for sex. But when the supply of food became insufficient, they abandoned the women and left them to starve. To tell what the women did then, Joshua warns us, ‘will perhaps not be believed’. Many of the women met together and secretly conspired to commit

acts of cannibalism. They would go out furtively into the streets of the city at dusk or dawn, and attack anyone they were capable of overpowering, such as other women, the old or children. They would pull them inside, kill them and then eat them, either boiled or roasted. Eventually the Persian occupiers discovered what was going on, on account of 'the odour of the roasting'. They used torture and execution to put a stop to it.

Such acts may or may not have happened in reality. But for the Christian historian, the description of cannibalism was a way to emphasize how total was the subversion of proper human values. It was a means for him to establish the kind of hell on earth that was suggestive of both the fate that awaited the damned and the disasters that would take place in the run-up to Judgement Day. A dystopia is established where women go out in public, kill and then even eat children. It is the exact opposite of what women were expected to do in their normal lives. This is, of course, not to suggest that women did not really suffer in ancient sieges, that all these stories were rhetorical devices to create an image of social disaster. It was not for nothing that after Cannae, the women of Rome went to the temples with their children and prayed that there might sometime be an end to the calamities to the city.¹⁴ They stood to lose every bit as much as their menfolk. But the plight of women as part of the collateral damage of warfare could also be exploited by male writers to pursue their own political and religious agendas.

The threat of destruction at the hands of a besieging force could generate discord between the sexes. Julius Caesar recounts how on his expedition against the Gauls, the male inhabitants of one town that he had surrounded decided to abandon their women and children and make a run for it. Leaving at the dead of night and heading out through the extensive marshes of that area, they hoped to carry it off without any great loss of men and so join up with the Gallic leader, Vercingetorix, who was camped nearby. But their wives discovered their plan and as the men were about to set off in the dark, the women rushed out into the streets and threw themselves weeping at the feet of their husbands. They begged the men not to abandon them and their children to the Romans. The men were unmoved for, as Caesar says, 'fear does not generally admit of mercy in extreme danger'. So the women took more direct moves to prevent the exodus. They began to shout aloud, and so alerted the Romans to the fact that something was going on. This gave rise to an even greater fear among the Gauls, that the Romans would get to the paths through the marshes first, and so they abandoned their plan.¹⁵

When a besieged city was taken, particularly if it had put up fierce resistance, it was commonplace for the adult male population to be killed and the rest enslaved. But it may also have been reasonable for the civilian population to expect mercy to be shown to them if they gave up voluntarily and without much of a fight. One fictional example of this can be found in the novel *The Aethiopian Story* by Heliodorus. When the town of Cyrene in North Africa was under siege by an Ethiopian army, the townspeople realized that resistance was useless and so decided to leave en masse and throw themselves on the Ethiopians' mercy, hoping to move them to compassion. Opening the town gates, the people marched in procession, with those at the front holding branches as a sign of supplication and carrying pictures of the gods for divine protection. Before they reached the Ethiopians, they fell to their knees to entreat for mercy and raised a collective mournful and piteous wail of supplication. To excite even greater compassion they set their young ones on the ground in front of them and allowed them to go wherever chance took them, 'so using the most innocent and least culpable section of the population to mollify the ire of the Ethiopians'. Terrified and unable to understand what was happening, the small children ran away from their mothers and, driven by the deafening cries of supplication behind them, went towards the enemy, some crawling, others toddling unsteadily, all whimpering pathetically.¹⁶ Whether such tactics would have worked in real life is impossible to say. But it suggests that invading armies may have had some compassion for their victims, a fact which gave townspeople an opportunity to try and massage such feelings and thereby reduce the scale of the impact that being sacked would otherwise have.

It would be a mistake to get too misty-eyed about such fictional accounts. The fate of most cities that fell to the enemy was brutal and often seems to have represented a direct attack on their culture. The effect on those on the receiving end was, not surprisingly, devastating. When, for example, the Romans sacked the Italian town of Alba in 672 BCE they demolished the city by pulling down all the houses, and drove the people away, forcing them to abandon their homes and gods:

Everybody hurried to carry out what he could, and left the city, abandoning their household gods, and the houses where they had been born and brought up. And now the streets were filled with an unbroken procession of refugees, whose mutual pity as they gazed at one another caused their tears to start afresh. Plaintive cries also began to be heard, emanating mainly from the women, when they passed the venerable temples guarded by armed Romans, and, as it

seemed to them, left their gods in captivity.¹⁷

We should also remember that the Roman state made periodic efforts to compel certain groups to change their behaviour on pain of torture or even death. So Christians faced rigorous persecution under the emperor Decius in 250 and again under Diocletian from 303, during which many were tortured, hamstrung, maimed and martyred for their beliefs. Even though the numbers involved were probably relatively small by comparison with the sack of a major city, and the impression of magnitude is partly created by the rhetorical exaggerations of Christian sources, these persecutions represented a comparable disaster for the groups who experienced them. And in the same way that the citizens of sacked cities fled for their lives, so Christians were compelled in the face of state-sponsored terror to flee or go into hiding until the heat was off.

Attacking the food supply was a dangerous weapon in the ancient world, one which, though aimed at opposing armies, inevitably caused considerable collateral damage among the civilian population. After Vercingetorix had sustained a series of losses in conventional engagements, he decided to prosecute his war against Caesar's invading legions in a very different way.¹⁸ The Gauls' main objective from that point was to prevent the Romans from foraging and procuring provisions. This, Vercingetorix calculated, would be easy because of his ample numbers of cavalry and because the time of year meant that the Romans would have to go looking for food in stores in homes rather than out in the fields. The Gallic cavalry would simply destroy those homes and villages over such an extent of country as the Romans appeared capable of scouring in their search for forage. Moreover, any towns which were not completely secure against every danger because of their fortifications or natural position should be burnt to prevent the Romans from taking them and carrying off an abundance of provisions and plunder. Vercingetorix reminded his countrymen that, however galling these sacrifices might appear, it would be much more distressing if their wives and children were dragged off to slavery, and they themselves were slaughtered. For these were 'the evils which must necessarily befall the conquered'. Devastating agriculture was also a tactic of Roman warfare. When the Romans declared war on an enemy it explicitly included their lands, and when necessary, such a scorched-earth policy could even be applied to Roman territory to impede an invader.¹⁹

Perhaps the best account of these evils is Tacitus' narrative of the sack of the city of Cremona in north Italy, which occurred in the civil war in 68–9 CE when Vespasian besieged Vitellius' troops within the city:

Forty thousand armed men burst into the town; the number of camp-followers and servants was even greater; and they were more ready to indulge in lust and cruelty. Neither rank nor years protected anyone; their assailants debauched and killed without distinction. Aged men and women near the end of life, though despised as booty, were dragged off to be the soldiers' sport. Whenever a young woman or a handsome youth fell into their hands, they were torn to pieces by the violent struggles of those who tried to secure them, and this in the end drove the despoilers to kill one another. Individuals tried to carry off for themselves money or the masses of gold dedicated in the temples, but they were assailed and slain by others stronger than themselves. Some, scorning the booty before their eyes, flogged and tortured the owners to discover hidden wealth and dug up buried treasure. They carried firebrands in their hands, and when they had secured their loot, in utter wantonness they threw these into the vacant houses and empty temples. In this army there were many passions corresponding to the variety of speech and customs, for it was made up of citizens, allies, and foreigners; no two held the same thing sacred and there was no crime which was held unlawful. For four days did Cremona supply food for destruction. When everything sacred and profane sank into the flames, there stood solitary outside the walls the temple of Mefitis, protected by either its position or its deity.²⁰

The sacking destroyed everything that was good and civilized about city life. It created a dystopia where lust and cruelty replaced reason, where the sacred made way for sacrilege, and where crime became the new law. The city became a place where only a strange foreign god outside the walls was spared destruction. The lesson is clear: this is what happens when there are emperors. When power lies in the hands of one man, good government goes out the window, and power struggles drag ordinary citizens into the worst kinds of disaster.

Stories of sacked cities were a good way to arouse pity in ancient readers. As Keitel says, to the ancients 'the capture and sack of the city must have seemed the ultimate disaster'.²¹ It represented loss of household, family, freedom, status and identity. Yet the vigorous detailing which Tacitus employs also suggests that he was having to work hard here to keep his audience. The sacked city was something of a topos of ancient literature, the fall of Troy being the most famous exemplar. Such accounts, therefore, could become hackneyed. The historian Sallust describes a speech of Caesar complaining about the clichéd speeches given by public orators, which dwell on the horrors of war: 'the wretched fate of the conquered, the rape of maidens and boys, children torn from their parents' arms, matrons subjected to the will of the victors, temples and homes pillaged, bloodshed and fire'.

‘In short,’ he says, barely suppressing a yawn, ‘arms and corpses, gore and grief everywhere’.²² The popularity of this theme meant that orators were advised to add gory details to enhance the pathos. In his rhetorical training manual, Quintilian explains how best to ham it up. He advises that simply to say ‘the city was sacked’ is no doubt ‘to embrace everything implied in such a disaster’, but that this does not ‘touch the emotions’. Therefore, the writer should expand and create images

of flames racing through houses and temples, the crash of falling roofs, the single sound made up of many cries, the blind flight of some, others clinging to their dear ones in a last embrace, shrieks of women and children, the old men whom an unkind fate has allowed to live to see this day; then will come the pillage of property, secular and sacred, the frenzied activity of plunderers . . . the prisoners driven in chains . . . the mother who tries to keep her child with her, and the victors fighting one another wherever the spoils are richer.²³

It did not matter whether these details were true or not. Quintilian says explicitly that ‘it will even be legitimate to invent things of the kind that usually occur’. This was a tough, cynical approach to the fate of victims, using them as colour for rhetorical flourishes in political and legal speeches.

But however hard-nosed an approach this may seem, Quintilian was a professional orator who knew his audience. He understood what moved Romans to pity. He advocated exaggerating the details because he knew the Romans were a discerning audience when it came to the horrors of warfare. It took more than a standard sacking to arouse their emotions. But if the right buttons were pressed, then the Romans did care about what happened to the victims of these man-made disasters. We cannot, therefore, assume that any of the details of such accounts are accurate, since they belong to the kind of disaster narratives we examined in the previous chapter. But we can say that it is wrong to infer from this rhetorical manipulation that the Romans were heartless when it came to human suffering. This is further evidenced by Tacitus’ account of the fate of the victims of Cremona. He records that Vespasian was responding to public indignation when he issued a proclamation forbidding anyone to keep a citizen of Cremona captive. In fact, Tacitus tells us, ‘the common feeling of all Italy had already made the soldiers’ booty valueless, for all Italians loathed the idea of buying slaves like these’.

What made accounts of military disasters so popular among the literate Roman elite was that these situations placed individuals under

extreme pressure and so revealed their true character. Rome was a militaristic society that thrived on the back of organized aggression. It seemed natural, therefore, for readers to be interested in historical examples which brought the details of that culture of militarism to the fore. A good example of this can be found in Polybius' account of the Romans after the defeat at Cannae.²⁴ He describes how one consequence of the battle was that they immediately abandoned all hope of retaining their supremacy in Italy. Indeed, they were terrified about the very future of Rome, as they expected Hannibal to appear at any moment. Another defeat in Cisalpine Gaul exacerbated these fears and people began to think that Fortune herself had turned against them. Yet the senate did not give in. It exhorted and encouraged the populace, strengthened the defences of the city, and deliberated on the situation with 'manly coolness'. As a result of this, even though the Romans had suffered a disastrous defeat and their military reputation had been shattered, they not only recovered their supremacy in Italy and afterwards defeated the Carthaginians, but in a few years 'made themselves masters of the whole world'. As such, disasters played an important role in the construction of Roman identity. The historic behaviour and resilience of Romans both at home and on active service provided a well of stories on which to draw later for inspiration and comparison. The past provided a yardstick against which subsequent generations of Romans could measure themselves. Remember that Rome was a society that enjoyed watching spectacles of great personal struggle and suffering in a militarized context. Gladiators and re-enactments of sea-battles in the arena gave vigorous displays of the kind of moral values and strength that a Roman audience was expected to have and would need to display if Rome was to maintain its pre-eminence.

A triumph – the procession through Rome awarded to a conspicuously successful general and his troops – also gave a public display of these values that had made Rome great.²⁵ This was an act of collective remembrance through which the Romans sought to revel in their success. It was how the Romans tried to comprehend the glory, not the gore, of war. To a world that saw warfare move to a horrifyingly industrial level in the twentieth century, this can seem shocking. But for the Romans it seemed natural to celebrate their military victories. The triumphal procession can be seen as an attempt to interpret that success within a traditional frame of reference. The ordered legions, cheered on by the crowds of citizens and led by an almost god-like general, was, in some ways, a representation of how the Romans wanted to see their society: solidly behind its soldiers and led by heroes. It is an image which brought the remembrance of warfare into

the urban space and, through its regular processional routes, made it part of the cityscape. Remembering the war in the form of a triumph became a process akin to the waging of the war itself. Creating such an image required the Romans to find an appropriate language of victory to express the sheer scale of their success. Cultural symbols, in the form of war spoils and captives, acted as collective focuses for the ritual. Such community celebration also created bonds between citizens. The act of collective remembrance affirmed communal values, publicly asserted its moral character, and marked off the Romans as a special people. Victory was infused with cultural messages about the martial virtues and the benefits of war. The triumph, therefore, functioned to express meaning, solidarity and community within the Roman citizen body by glorifying the success it had achieved on the battlefield. The crowd were incorporated into this success and became stakeholders in its remembrance.

Arches of Disaster, Columns of Catastrophe

Communal remembering of this type is always an intensely political activity and can be manipulated accordingly.²⁶ Deciding what should be commemorated, how and by whom could easily become a site of conflict. Members of the elite went to great lengths to have a triumph awarded to them and not to their political rivals. The popularity and high-profile exposure which the procession gave meant that, under the emperors, triumphs were usually limited to the emperors themselves and members of their family. Which particular triumphs were celebrated, then, was a sensitive issue. What they celebrated, of course, was the infliction of disaster upon other peoples. There was a clear message in this. As Beard writes, those ‘who triumph today may one day be triumphed over’. The triumph, therefore, provided an expression of the meaning of victory and defeat. The triumphal arch was another visual expression of this and played an important part in the fixing of the meaning of triumph in the public consciousness. There had been as many as thirty-six built in Rome by the fourth century CE, only three of which have survived (those of Titus, Septimius Severus and Constantine). Other prominent buildings also provided a visual monument to Roman triumphs. Trajan’s column, erected as his funerary memorial, and the later column of Marcus Aurelius offered detailed pictorial accounts of the military campaigns of these emperors. All these triumphal monuments gave an architectural record of another’s disaster, as seen through the eyes of the victor. It is worth examining what this architecture can tell us

about how the Romans understood disaster. For while these structures have the principal aim of celebrating the Romans' victories, they achieve this by drawing on many details of the disasters which defeated barbarians had suffered as a consequence.

Triumphal architecture gave a graphic account of the meaning of defeat and disaster. This does not mean that this was their only purpose. Trajan's victory column served as his tomb and as a focal point for his forum, built with the spoils of his Dacian campaigns. That forum was itself a public space for the purposes of carrying out daily business. But it provided a context for such daily activities which was decorated with a variety of martial imagery. The entablature above the columns of the forum was crowned on all sides by gilded statues of military figures and booty from the Dacian war.²⁷ The reliefs of the column itself provided a graphic account of the Roman conquest of Dacia. They were highly selective, but in total approximately 200 metres of them served to cover both Dacian wars, each of which lasted for two years. Trajan's forum complex, therefore, created an urban space in which images of another people's defeat and subjugation lay all about.

Defeat was about losing possessions. Various of the reliefs on Trajan's column depict the burning of the Dacians' timber huts, the slaughter of their livestock, and the carrying off of valuable items as plunder.²⁸ Defeat involved having a society's most sacred items taken away for public display in Rome. The arch of Titus contains images of the ritual objects from the temple of Jerusalem, including the seven-branched lampstand, the menorah.²⁹ The fact that the Romans accompanying these objects are portrayed with an air of solemn authority underlines just how seriously the Romans themselves took these triumphal rituals. This was not an occasion for triumphalism, but for deep reflection on the cultural destruction the returning army had wrought on Rome's enemies. To capture and bring back as loot objects which sat at the heart of their enemy's religion was to underscore the totality of the Roman victory. This is also seen in images such as the deforestation of Dacia on Trajan's column. This was an ecological triumph, which could change the landscape to allow a Roman-style economic regeneration in the form of bridges, buildings and other technological advancements.³⁰

Defeat was about losing family. On Marcus Aurelius' column we find barbarian women depicted as victims of violence at the hands of the Roman soldiery. They are abused, trampled and raped. Many are mothers, often shown in great distress at the threat of impending violence.³¹ The images glorify the violence of Rome towards these

defenceless women and commemorate it for posterity. The loss of children is particularly symbolic as it shows 'the depth of the defeat of these barbarian peoples'.³² This is a permanent solution to the problem of Dacia. What was dreadful for the Dacian men, of course, was that they were unable to prevent this happening to their women and children. But from the Roman point of view, such a failure merely reflected the fact that they were not man enough for the job in any case. Their weakness meant that it was only right that Roman might should prevail and replace them with the Roman emperor as head of the wider Dacian family.



The loss of core religious artefacts, such as the Jewish menorah, was one of the ways Rome inflicted disaster on those it conquered. Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Above all, defeat was about losing leadership. Roman society was ruled by an elite that thought highly of itself and its powers. It saw the removal of a society's own elite as the most terrible defeat it could subject it to. This is reflected in the fact that what often counted for most in a triumph in Rome was the display of defeated monarchs and their families. These captives were not always executed, again reflecting that what mattered to the Romans was to see the political head of an enemy metaphorically but not literally on a plate before them.³³ Various scenes on Trajan's column focus on the fate of the Dacian elite. The noblemen commit collective suicide and lie dead in an impersonal, mass grave. It is probably their leader Decebalus who ladles out the poison to them from a jar. Decebalus' own suicide shows that the ultimate outcome of defeat by Rome is the death of domestic political leadership. Indeed, the whole political, aristocratic class has been wiped out.³⁴ This loss of leadership is, perhaps, metaphorically represented in the repeated image of the severed head.³⁵ One Roman soldier is shown gripping the head of a slain Dacian in his teeth. The head of Decebalus himself is displayed publicly to the Roman troops and other onlookers as a way of emphasizing the end of Dacia's political freedom.



Detail from the column of Marcus Aurelius showing the decapitation of barbarian prisoners.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Images of their suffering military disaster was the medium through which barbarians were turned not only into victims but into victims who deserved their misfortune. They are shown as morally lacking, disordered and uncivilized. In battle, Dacian casualties lie untended in comparison with the bandages that swathe injured Romans. Solid, technologically advanced Roman buildings and structures contrast with the flimsy, backward huts of the natives. In one scene, a group of Dacian women torture some Roman prisoners, who lie naked and bound, and turn away from the women perhaps in pain.³⁶ This was the kind of barbaric cruelty that Dacian women were capable of meting out. By contrast, we see a captured Dacian noblewoman being seen off by Trajan on a boat. This could be Decebalus' sister. Her fate is unclear: is she on her way home or on a boat to a triumph in Rome? Whatever the scene portrays exactly, the point of the image seems to be the displaying of Trajan's clemency versus the general slaughter that surrounds him. Throughout the column's illustrations, the Roman army is shown in clinical order and calm in opposition to the Dacian sense of panic. The Romans' greater military skill means they suffer

fewer casualties than the Dacians with their piles of dead. The Romans build cities, whereas the Dacians dwell in the woods and mountains. Above all, the Romans have the favour of the gods, with Jupiter himself hurling thunderbolts in their support.³⁷ It all goes to justify the need to tame the Dacian beast that prowls menacingly over the Danube. And once the wars are over, the final scenes show the benefits that Roman rule has brought: scenes of movement and migration, perhaps of Roman settlers or of Dacians leaving, both suggestive of peace returning.³⁸



Dacian women torture captured Roman soldiers in this scene from Trajan's column.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Barbarian behaviour in triumphal depictions reveals their inner qualities. They show themselves to be weak physically, mentally and emotionally. Military defeat is the clearest evidence of their physical weakness. Mental and emotional anguish is displayed in the bafflement and terror of defeated Dacians on Trajan's column, who look fearfully over their shoulder for whatever new horror might await them.³⁹ In one scene, barbarian supplicants implore a calm and restrained Trajan. This is what defeat has done to them: it has forced them into expressing emotions to try and save themselves, something which a Roman man was not expected to do. Emotion and fear would normally be expected of women. Barbarian women on the column of Marcus Aurelius are shown as terrified, clinging on to their children and touching each other with comforting gestures.⁴⁰ But the disaster that Rome has inflicted on the Dacian men has left them emotional and terrified too. This can be seen also in images of Dacians on the

great Trajanic frieze, slabs of which survive on the later arch of Constantine.⁴¹ On slab VI, for example, we see fleeing Dacians looking backwards in fear and panic. They are contorted, twisting, turning, formless and disordered. Their turbulent movement is a reflection of the collapse of their army's discipline and of their mental disarray. It is a mental weakness which itself both explains Roman victory and justifies their intervention in the first place. These were a people simply too weak to rule themselves, a fact which the military disaster has clearly exposed.

This barbarian mental fragility is also reflected in their clothing, hair and other physical attributes. The many folds and disturbances in the cloth of barbarian dress contrast with the neat lines of Roman garb. Their dishevelled hair acts as a metaphor for Dacian disorganization and their poor mental state. This is particularly true of barbarian women. So on the column of Marcus Aurelius, we have a German woman fleeing from a sacked village, with her panic and distress all shown in her ruffled dress and hair.⁴² Hair-pulling becomes a motif. Barbarian women being pulled along by the hair parallels what the Romans were doing to their country: dragging it kicking and screaming into the civilized world. This was how to control the uncontrolled. Slab VII of the Trajanic frieze contains images of Dacian prisoners, both dead and alive. The Romans have more uniform facial features, in contrast with the variety of the Dacians, a parallel perhaps for the better discipline and uniformity of the Roman army. The barbarians have thin faces, beards and long hair. Their features are more plastic and expressive. With hollow cheeks, mouths open to express fright, pathetic eyes, sagging lids and heads inclined, their facial contortions reveal stress and contrast with the emotionless Roman determination.⁴³ Roman faces are young, smooth and similar, expressing military virtues such as energy, order and discipline. The Romans stand in line, whereas the barbarians lie injured, dead or dying, or in awkward poses that contrast with the harmony of the Roman forces.⁴⁴ It is all a metaphor for the contrast between barbarian chaos and Roman order: the difference between triumph and disaster.

This was physiognomic art and it was used to reveal the inner psychological and moral qualities of the Roman foe. Moreover, it can be argued that the Dacian prisoner became the 'defining image' of the age of the reign of Trajan.⁴⁵ This was how he liked to characterize the benefits that his rule had brought to Rome: military glory, wealth from captured goods and slaves, and a reassertion of Roman values, all of which was personified in the figure of the pathetic, defeated Dacian. It is perhaps best encapsulated in the iconic figure of the

screaming barbarian on the column of Marcus Aurelius. Executed by being speared through the back, his dramatic facial expression, disordered clothes and hair, submissive kneeling and his suffering all embody the meaning of defeat. He represents what Roman power could achieve. We should not assume that a Roman viewer of this or similar images would have had any pity for the victim. The victims were not shown as deserving any sympathy, rather as deserving of their fate. The generation of sympathy was not, in any case, the purpose of the depiction. This was art for political purposes, and the barbarian's suffering was designed to exalt Rome. As Leander Touati says, 'To take an interest in the defeated is just another way of exalting the Roman achievement. The enemy's fear underlines its extent and thoroughness.'⁴⁶

This at least was the official view. We cannot know if any of the Roman viewers of these images saw through their fictions and felt sympathy for the victims depicted in them. We should remember that the Romans loved to watch gladiatorial fights for their entertainment and often used representations of such murderous events to decorate their homes. The deaths and suffering of barbarians were for the most part probably considered to be a blessing. It was simply the flip-side of a Roman triumph. The characterization of these defeated barbarians in such villainous terms was part of an ethnocentric code for the meaning of 'Roman', expressed by means of opposites. The supposed disorder of the barbarian reflected the counter-values of the Roman military, where discipline and control were expected. These images, therefore, expressed the meaning of triumph to a domestic audience by means of showing what it meant to suffer disaster. The stress of war was where such contrasts of behaviour and character could most clearly come to the fore. It all went to show Romans the benefits of their power, while retaining a barely hidden warning that such success relied on the maintenance of such traditional Roman values.

Perhaps the real disaster of ancient warfare was that it was such an inbuilt part of the internal and international system of conflict resolution. It was considered a natural and praiseworthy part of the political process. As another golden-tongued orator Dio Chrysostom bemoaned:

Whenever there comes a pestilence or an earthquake, we blame the gods, in the belief that they cause misery for mankind, and we claim they are not righteous or benevolent, not even if they are punishing us justly for most grievous sins; so great is our hatred of those evils which occur through chance. Yet war, which is no less destructive than an earthquake, we choose of our own volition; and we do not

blame at all the human beings who are responsible for these evils, as we blame the gods for earthquakes or pestilence, but we even think them patriotic and we listen to them with delight when they speak.⁴⁷

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Let us finish by asking if comparative evidence can help us acquire any better understanding of the stresses which the disasters of war could inflict upon its victims' minds. All disasters generated terror and fear, but war seems to have created a degree of suffering that operated on a profound level, affecting all aspects of an individual's existence. Obviously, not all were affected equally by warfare. Soldiers were in some ways better placed to cope with the stresses which war brought. Warfare is, in effect, an attempt to inflict disaster on the enemy, and the training that soldiers receive is designed to ensure they are the winning side. It also helps them be resilient in the face of the many difficulties they face on campaign, ranging from extremes of heat and dehydration to losing comrades and the shock of seeing death close up. Disaster is also a standard part of the battle process and a known possibility for all its combatants. If disaster does then happen, it does not normally have the same overwhelming psychological effect on soldiers as on civilians.⁴⁸ However, there is interaction between the rival combatants that is not present in the world of civil disasters. Fires and famines do not contrive to make the situation even harder for its victims, whereas soldiers consciously try to turn up the heat on their enemy. This element can make the battlefield a uniquely stressful environment.

Traumatic stress can have acute and chronic effects. That is not to say that all have the same psychological response to warfare; they do not. Nor do most suffer prolonged psychiatric illness as a result. But many do. It is worth clarifying more exactly what constitutes a traumatic event: it is something which is dangerous, overwhelming, sudden, unexpected and rare. In response to exposure to this type of event, many display symptoms such as heightened anxieties, startled reactions and numbness. The terminology for such symptoms has changed markedly. In the First World War, it was known as shell-shock. Studies of men who had served in the Second World War led to the inclusion of a definition of traumatic neurosis in the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the bible of American mental health practice, in 1952. A revised version of this disorder, known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), was first included in the third edition of DSM in 1980, based on numerous

studies of the emotional, behavioural and psychological consequences of catastrophic events. PTSD results from exposure to a traumatic event. It includes symptoms such as intrusive recollections or dreams, the inability to remember some aspects of trauma, a feeling of estrangement, difficulty in sleeping and anger. The severity of the trauma is one of the best predictors of the occurrence of mental illness among those affected by it. Studies of Second World War veterans showed a high correlation between mental illness and battle intensity. Lifetime prevalence rates among the whole population are low, at about 1 per cent. But among those exposed to war, the incidence increases markedly. About 6 per cent of Second World War veterans showed symptoms, rising to between 20 and 30 per cent among those who were wounded.

Rome was not a society that cared for its victims. This goes without saying in the matter of defeated barbarians. But in addition, Romans will not have had much sympathy for their own soldiers and civilians who displayed symptoms of mental illness after being affected by the impact of war. As with the Dacians, it would probably have been taken as a sign of weakness and a want of manliness to be unable to withstand the stress that warfare could bring. War was seen as a test and so to admit to failings was to admit to failure. The amount of severe combat that a large percentage of the Roman population was exposed to at certain points in its history suggests that many of them would have suffered from the same kinds of stresses that we see reflected in the portrayal of the disaster-struck barbarians of Dacia and Germany. But no evidence of this survives because it did not fit in with the Roman self-image of a triumphal people who were immune to such things. Romans showed no weakness, or so they would have us believe. Even if it was perhaps the case that they were a better-trained, tougher people, it is likely that there would have been some who fell by the psychological wayside. The way they would have displayed those symptoms, would, however, have been very different from that in the modern world.⁴⁹ The next chapter will consider the complex issue of how this psychological impact of disasters seems to have presented itself.

The Psychological Impact

The year 560 CE saw the start of some very strange behaviour in the city of Amida: people began to ‘bark like dogs, bleat like goats, meow like cats, cuckoo like cocks, and imitate the voices of all dumb animals’. Not only that, but, according to John of Ephesus’ account, groups of deranged sufferers ‘gathered in groups, confused, troubled, disturbed, causing confusion’, and they staggered about in the night on their way to the cemetery; they sang and raged in public and they bit each other; they uttered sounds ‘as if with horns and trumpets’, and used vulgar language ‘as if from devils in person’. They would explode with laughter, and even utter ‘immodest talk and evil blasphemy’. Interestingly, John notes that it was mainly boys and girls who were affected, but adults exhibited the symptoms too. The disorder took on a physical expression, with the afflicted jumping about and climbing walls, ‘hanging themselves upside-down, falling and rolling down while naked’. So extreme was their confusion that none ‘knew either his house or home’.¹

This bizarre group behaviour did not just erupt of its own accord. The fortress city of Amida, where John had been born, lay strategically on the river Tigris, in the border area with the Persian empire. Periodic warfare between the two great regional rivals made it an inherently unstable place. But the sixth century had seen the city struck by repeated hammer blows of misfortune. In 502 CE it had suffered a three-month-long siege at the hands of the Persians, only to fall and lose 80,000 of its inhabitants in the resulting slaughter.² The next two years witnessed vigorous Roman counter-offensives under the emperor Anastasius. We saw, however, that the Roman sieges brought more suffering to the city-dwellers inside the walls than to the Persian defenders. The men were imprisoned, the women were sexually abused, and food became so scarce that people resorted to acts of cannibalism. Being returned to Roman control under a settlement in 505 CE did not bring security to the population. This largely Monophysite city was to suffer vigorous religious persecution at the hands of one of Justin I’s orthodox henchmen, Bishop Abraham bar Kaili, who held his position for some thirty years. This was a man of whom it was said that he employed a band of lepers to infect his Monophysite prisoners and pollute their property. Then in 543 CE the

great plague struck. John tells us that the city and its environs lost 30,000 dead in just three months. The shock of the plague brought the economy to its knees and famine ensued. Finally in 560 CE, following this great series of disasters, people were panicked by rumours of another Persian invasion. It was said that the false reports were spread by a band of 'rebellious demons' appearing in the guise of refugees fleeing from the supposed attack. Alarm spread and the people of the region 'migrated all at once, and great confusion and losses occurred everywhere for many days'. It was the final straw. The fear of renewed siege seems to have tipped some sections of society over the edge: 'It was rage, madness, frenzy', explains John. The city suffered a collective mental breakdown, which saw all the normal conventions of social behaviour overturned.

Familiar as we now are with the excesses of ancient disaster rhetoric, our immediate reaction is to wonder whether John's whole account is nothing but a tissue of exaggerations. Sceptics will also wonder what purpose such a florid account might serve. The aim of this chapter is to bring out some of the factors that helped drive John's passionate text and to explain why he structured his account in such an extreme fashion. Mental disorder was a complex phenomenon in the Roman world, which spilled over into many different aspects of social life. The analysis will draw together many of the themes we have explored so far: the relationship between disasters and religion in Roman society, the exploitation of disasters as opportunities for elite self-promotion, and the importance of disaster discourse. But I want to start by examining this strange group behaviour in the light of what modern mental health research can tell us about the psychological impact of disasters, in order to see if we can find any firmer base to John's account. I then consider some of these findings in relation to the Roman world to see what light they can help shed on the mental health of those in antiquity who had suffered catastrophe.

The previous chapters have shown that disasters were a recurrent feature of Roman society. Whether natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and droughts, biological calamities such as plagues and epidemics, man-made catastrophes, like wars, or disasters which cannot so easily be compartmentalized, like famines and shipwrecks, disasters were a hard fact of the harsh reality of Roman life. But the great plague, which first arrived in the empire in 541 CE and spread to Constantinople the following year, raised the concept of disaster to a new level.³ The calamity had been prefigured by the appearance of terrifying phantoms at sea. Numerous spectres of boats of copper were seen, in which apparently headless black people were sitting. But this was much more than a normal

epidemic. When it reached Constantinople, it started with vigour, killing, we are told, as many as 16,000 of the poor each day. At first, people not only counted them but also buried them ‘with great diligence’ and gave them proper funeral rites. But total disorder soon took hold. The plague struck down the wealthy and the powerful. All ages were humbled and crushed in what John describes as a ‘wine press of wrath’ in which ‘all ranks were pressed on the top of each other’. People forgot about money and wills and possessions. Even ‘selling and buying itself ceased’. A complete social dystopia had come about, where the catastrophe was so powerful that all forms of order and hierarchy had been destroyed.

Modern disaster research suggests that the psychological impact of such intensely stressful events would have been significant. A large body of research has examined the link between the extreme stresses which deeply traumatic events exert upon individuals and their subsequent development of mental disorders.⁴ Disasters are a world where the unexpected, the unmanageable and the uncertain come to dominate people’s lives and impose considerable psychological pressure on the individuals exposed to them. They are events which shatter any normal sense of security. They are all about loss: of life, property and relationships. They involve feelings of extreme fear, helplessness and horror. Survivors have to adjust to a community that has been radically altered and is bereft at its loss. It is not surprising that such experiences can damage the mind as well as the body. The psychological effect of exposure to a disaster is, however, a complex phenomenon. Damage to the mind, unlike physical wounds, is both hard to see and can be hard to heal. People also respond to disasters in very different ways.

One large-scale survey found that the most common longer-term mental disorders suffered by individuals in the aftermath of a disaster were post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and panic, with PTSD being by far the largest at 68 per cent.⁵ As we have seen, PTSD is a relatively newly diagnosed disorder, first appearing in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), published in 1980, before being revised in the fourth edition of 1994. It describes the development of a range of symptoms following exposure to an extremely traumatic stressor, either personally or as a witness, usually involving threat to the individual’s life or serious injury. An essential element is that the individual must have experienced ‘intense fear, helplessness, or horror’.⁶ The symptoms include the persistent reliving of the traumatic event in the form of recurrent dreams or intrusive flashback, feelings of detachment and withdrawal from society, apathy and reduced

emotional response. The trauma itself can be thought of as being the result of an experience which has generated intense anxiety that is too powerful to be assimilated or dealt with in a normal way.⁷ Of course, what is seen as traumatic is culturally dependent and can vary significantly. Between 50 and 70 per cent of the US population is exposed to a traumatic event sometime during their lifetime, and 5–12 per cent of the population will go on to exhibit symptoms of PTSD.⁸ In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, 7.5 per cent of a random group of adults living south of 110th Street in Manhattan exhibited the symptoms of PTSD. Of those directly affected by the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, 34 per cent were diagnosed with PTSD. The 2004 South Asian Tsunami left 12 per cent of those displaced suffering PTSD when examined two months after the disaster. In general, of those suffering major trauma, about 25 per cent of individuals have been found to be unaffected, about 25 per cent to have suffered from short-term stress-related difficulties, known as acute stress disorder (ASD), and 50 per cent to have experienced more persistent problems. Of that 50 per cent, half had recovered within a year, and half became chronic sufferers of PTSD, depression and anxiety. In extreme situations, such as the Armenian earthquake of 1988 where high mortality was combined with little rescue effort and prolonged homelessness, as many as two-thirds of the affected population showed the symptoms of PTSD.

Most symptoms of mental disorder appear immediately following the event and 70 per cent improve naturally with time. In the South Asian Tsunami, the number suffering from PTSD fell from 12 per cent after two months to 7 per cent after nine months, those suffering depression from 30 per cent to 25 per cent in the same period, and those suffering anxiety from 37 per cent to 17 per cent. The prevalence rate among the group of New Yorkers living south of 110th Street fell from 7.5 per cent one month after the attacks to 1.7 per cent after four months and just 0.6 per cent after six months. The severity and number of stressors that an individual suffers seem to be the most important factors in predicting the severity of mental health problems he or she will subsequently encounter. To use New York again as an example, the percentage of people suffering from PTSD one month after the attacks rose from 7.5 per cent to 20 per cent when the sample was taken from adults living south of Canal Street and hence much closer to the World Trade Centre. The figure rose to as many as 30 per cent among those who were injured and 37 per cent of those who escaped from the Twin Towers themselves. To underline the psychological risks that rescue workers experience in addition to the many physical threats they undergo, members of the Fire Department

of New York directly involved in the attacks exhibited a seventeen-fold increase in stress-related disorders one year after the event.

If the degree of exposure to the disaster and the severity of stress suffered are the most consistent predictors of later mental health issues, that exposure can take a variety of forms. Threat to self and personal injury are important factors but witnessing death and property loss also have predictive abilities. Stress can be thought of as having a number of dimensions relating to the degree of loss that an individual suffers, the degree of life threat, the duration for which he or she is exposed to the stressor, and whether he or she is physically displaced by the disaster. There is a considerable range of possible psychological reactions to a disaster. PTSD is not the only response to trauma: depression, anxiety, somatic problems, poor sleep and alcohol abuse are other common symptoms. High co-morbidity exists with other mental disorders, meaning that people tend to suffer from multiple disorders simultaneously. The considerable range of possible responses to disasters shows that no simple cause-and-effect relationship can be established. This is partly the result of the fact that no two disasters are alike. In all but the most severe events, it is probably safe to say that most people do not develop psychiatric disorders but do show some short-term increase in various isolated symptoms. Most people do experience some kind of acute emotional reaction to the trauma of disaster, whether it is a response to the grief of losing family members and friends, property damage, financial loss or adverse living conditions. Fear, helplessness, guilt and anger are common post-disaster emotional reactions. Factors that act as buffers against the psychological stress that disasters induce include family and social support networks. One of the problems with many disasters is that family and social networks also tend to be disrupted, if not destroyed outright, and that daily life becomes that much more difficult because of various knock-on effects of the disruption. Additional stress factors can include the need to relocate, the resulting overcrowding, frightened children, and a loss of a sense of security and of trust in those in authority. Factors that have been shown to help with recovery include having a sense of purpose, social attachment, prayer, a sense of humour, acceptance of the situation without giving in to its difficulties, adaptiveness and a general will to survive. Managing to find some kind of meaning to the disaster aids recovery, as does finding someone to blame for it, both of which can be neatly achieved by attributing it to God's will.

People find a variety of ways to help them cope with psychological trauma. One is simply to ignore it, a response which is made more likely when mental wounds are less of a pressing problem than

managing to survive physically. One study of shipwreck survivors who had been rescued after thirteen days found that their longer-term mental health seemed to be related to a variety of psychological traits they had exhibited during the period of stress. They had maintained a strong focus on their families; they possessed a strong desire to survive and a refusal to accept death; they prayed and were hopeful that the situation would resolve itself. These factors seemed to provide a kind of affective nourishment at a time of great stress. Even then, five of the seven survivors exhibited substantial psychiatric disorders 12–24 months afterwards. One, however, was not only mentally well but claimed to have been enriched by the experience.⁹ This kind of robustness allows the individual to withstand the stress of the disaster event without degrading his or her psychological resources. Similarly, community resilience can support the stressed individual and mitigate the effects of the disaster, primarily through networks of supportive relationships. Resilience can be thought of as ‘the ability to adjust to stress and to restore equilibrium when confronted with trauma, tragedy and threat’.¹⁰ Community resilience tends to be associated with shared values, strong interpersonal relationships and good social communication. For example, individual recovery often involves fitting trauma into an enduring model of the wider social world in which that individual sits: ‘I did it for king and country.’ By contrast, social apathy, lack of resources and indifference can all limit the degree to which communal resilience can help the individual disaster victim.

We have seen that disasters are primarily social events. It is the misery of victims that generally defines a disaster as such. We have also seen that disasters are of sociological interest because the effects of most disastrous events are related to socioeconomic status. Those at the bottom of the social pile tend to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of most extreme events, whether food shortages, flood or war. A disaster is an expression of social vulnerabilities which results from the underlying societal ordering. This is particularly important when looking at the psychological morbidity associated with disasters because mental health problems are also related to socioeconomic status. The poorest in society tend to be exposed to a wider variety and greater depth of social stressors in their everyday lives, meaning that they tend to experience higher levels of mental disorder. At any one time, therefore, a sizeable minority of the overall populace will already be suffering from mental health problems before a disaster strikes, of whom a disproportionate number will be of lower socioeconomic status. Not only are the poor, therefore, more likely to suffer from mental disorders, but they are also more likely to be

negatively affected by the consequences of a disaster, while being less likely to have sufficient access to resources to help them cope. This can be seen in modern studies which have found that in 94 per cent of analyses of disaster-related mental health problems, female survivors were more adversely affected. Disasters are not gender neutral and women tend to be diagnosed with markedly higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders and somatization disorders.¹¹ Partly this may reflect pre-existing cultural prejudice – a belief that women are not capable of coping with stress – but it also reflects the fact that women's lower socioeconomic status as a whole exposes them to a greater degree of stress. Women, in other words, experience disasters both differently and more severely.¹² Similarly, victims of disasters in developing countries are more likely to exhibit severe or very severe mental impairment as a result. Whereas one large study found that this was the case for 25 per cent of an American sample, that figure rose to 78 per cent for victims from developing countries. Not only are the kinds of events which afflict the developing world more serious and therefore more stressful, but individual and communal recovery also takes place in a context of lower resources.

How much of this modern theory is applicable to the ancient world? To begin with, three caveats. The first is that most modern research on the mental health impact of disasters has concentrated on American examples. It is highly unlikely that these findings can simply be applied to ancient Roman examples and be expected to produce similar results. The second is that even in modern disasters, or even in different analyses of the same disaster, the range of results concerning levels of mental disorders varies considerably. We must be careful, therefore, not to treat the figures quoted above as anything more than indicative, if informed, guesses. Thirdly, levels of reported mental disorder following modern disasters vary considerably from society to society. Cultural attitudes towards fear, resilience and the self have significant roles in affecting the reported level of mental health. These considerations suggest that the problems involved in applying such concepts to the ancient world mean that we should not imagine that we can use modern evidence to predict the degree or the forms that such mental ill-health would have taken in antiquity. Each society attacks its inhabitants' mental health in its own particular way and in doing so generates its own unique form of mental disorder. Moreover, the mind does not exist in isolation. It is both individually and socially created and experienced, and affected by broader societal processes. Conceptions about the relationship between disasters and individual psychiatric suffering will always be linked to wider social attitudes towards suffering, blame and disorder. The best we can probably hope

to achieve, therefore, is to explain something about how a certain style of psychiatric expression has emerged from a specific social and cultural context.

Romans certainly recognized the mental impact that disasters could have. Seneca notes that 'it is not easy to keep one's wits during great disasters'. Instead, he says that 'when cities fall, when populations are crushed, the earth shakes, what wonder is it that minds wander bereft between grief and fear?' He sees that 'fear has made some people run around as though insane or panic stricken', but thinks that as a rule, it is 'generally the most unstable personalities' that develop such fear that 'they lose control of themselves'. By contrast, 'fear brings some back to their senses quickly whilst it disturbs others greatly and carries them over into insanity'.¹³ The effect of even moderate fear on an individual, however, can be to 'shatter the mind'. The Romans found it hard to express such mental symptoms as they lacked a technical psychological vocabulary. One Christian writer turned to analogies with drunkenness to portray the insane behaviour of those suffering from the plague: in his fifth account, John of Ephesus describes how 'everyone talked to his companion like men drunk with strong beer, baffled and confused. People were easily driven to insanity by the intoxicating plague.'

We can also get some general idea about the effect that disaster-related stress had on the Roman mind by looking at the fates of individuals born under certain alignments of the stars. The fourth-century astrologer Firmicus Maternus notes that those born when Leo is in conjunction with Saturn will suffer lower income, loss of mental faculties, injuries, and deaths in the family, and that such misfortunes will make them attempt suicide.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Dorotheus of Sidon emphasizes the psychological shock that material losses could engender in an individual: 'he will abound in calamity, misfortune in his property will reach him until everything that he possesses disappears, and he will be frightened, perplexed, obsessed with delusions'.¹⁵ During a severe disaster scenario, such as the destruction of Antioch in an earthquake in 528 ce, the victims appear to have been afflicted by a range of mental health problems. John of Ephesus tells how 'most of the survivors fled to other cities, leaving Antioch deserted and ruined. Others, on the mountain above the city, made shelters for themselves out of rugs, straw and nets, and sat inside these during the difficult winter.' The snow came down up to three cubits in depth. John describes how those survivors who remained in the city itself

offered lamenting prayers in great sorrow, while marching in

procession in the snow barefoot and holding in their hands olive branches. They went out from the city into the plain, as far as one mile, while the snow was falling on them. And they threw themselves on the snow, screaming in bitter grief, weeping painfully, and shouting 'Lord have mercy upon us.' They created a sorrowful and emotional scene, as they froze in the snow, turned pale and were lying on their faces, crying out in great physical and mental pain. Their faces were saddened and disfigured by tears and pain and by the severity of the winter cold.

Long-drawn-out disasters such as famines imposed a very different kind of mental stress on their victims from that created by sudden events like earthquakes. Food crises posed regular threats to sections of the Roman populace, placing great strain on kinship ties and social bonds, with the degree of selfish behaviour broadly correlating with the degree of malnutrition. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* describes how during a famine that occurred after a plague of locusts had eaten the crops, many were forced to leave their own districts and move to other regions. It was those in their prime who escaped, leaving behind those unable to make the arduous journey: instead, 'the infirm in the villages, along with the elderly and young, women and children, and those racked by hunger who were unable to walk to distant areas, went into the cities to live by begging'.¹⁶ And during the most extreme situations even the family unit disintegrated under the pressure of food shortage: 'There were children and infants bleating in the streets, some of whose mothers had died, others of whom, had abandoned their offspring and fled when they had asked them for something to eat, for they had nothing to give them.'¹⁷ In a world where the exposure of infants was considered an acceptable practice, it is worth reminding ourselves that this did not necessarily mean that parents felt less emotionally attached to their young. The death of children is clearly one of the most traumatic events, events which the high infant mortality and vulnerability to disasters such as famine would have made a sadly common occurrence in antiquity. The psychological effects of starvation can include depressions, light-headedness, irritability, bravado followed by weeping, anger alternating with passivity and apathy. Periodic hunger was for many in the Roman world almost a conventional part of life. It was almost inconceivable that people would always have enough food. Instead insecurity and anxiety were deeply ingrained in Roman existence. It is also worth remembering that famines hit the poorest hardest. The most vulnerable in society were placed in a situation where they were exposed to extreme levels of mental stress when they were lacking any adequate resources to help them cope with them. The fact that Roman

society assigned much of what can be termed ‘emotion work’ to women also meant that disasters placed them under particular pressure. Death in the family, household breakup and inability to care for their children adequately all placed an extra burden on women, as did the likelihood that during the recovery period there was a greater reliance on their role as caregivers and providers of emotional support at a time when mothering itself was probably made more difficult by the traumatic incidents that had affected the family.

A variety of coping mechanisms existed in Roman society to help deal with the psychological stresses that disasters could bring. A simple way was to indulge in black humour. One joke makes light of the ever-present threat of child mortality: ‘an egghead went to call on the parents of his best friend who had just died. “My son, you have devastated me!” lamented the father; “My son, you have put out the light of my life!” lamented the mother. The egghead remarked to his other friends, “If he really did all that, he deserved to have been burned alive.”’¹⁸

Stress was also externalized by being given a physical form. In his novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Achilles Tatius recognizes that human emotional response to the most profound disasters is of a different order from reaction to less stressful situations. After witnessing what he believed to be the death of his lover, Clitophon describes how he was unable to weep. He explains that ‘eyes are known to have this property in the larger disasters of life. During moderate disasters, tears flow freely – interceding with the persecutors for their victims and relieving those who suffer, rather like lancing a boil. But on occasions of overwhelming unhappiness, tears simply fail, deserting the battle and leaving the eyes alone.’ Instead, a kind of self-absorption takes over, which Tatius expresses in physical terms: ‘for as the tears rise from within, they are met by grief, which checks their progress along the path to the eyes and carries them down again, condensing in a steady stream, into the soul. There they aggravate the wound.’¹⁹ Emotional stress is therefore represented in a physical form which has a direct physical effect on the internal workings of the soul. And in this strongly somatic view of mental phenomena, it seemed natural to express emotional stress in physical, concrete ways. Aelius Aristides describes how he was caught in a storm on a boat, during which ‘The seamen sweated and shouted, and the passengers screamed . . . but I was content to say only, “O Asclepius”.’ He subsequently dreamt that the god Asclepius revealed to him ‘that it was fated for me to suffer shipwreck . . . and now it would be necessary for my safety and in order to fulfil my destiny, to embark in a skiff and to arrange it so that the skiff overturn and sink in the harbour, and that I myself be picked

up by someone and brought to land. For thus my fate would be fulfilled.’²⁰ Aristides carries out this command gladly, and indeed ‘the contrivance of the shipwreck, which occurred after a real danger, seemed wonderful to all’. We might doubt that Fate would be satisfied with such a ruse. But however genuinely destiny-fulfilling such a re-enactment was, it enabled Aristides to come to terms with the trauma of his near-shipwreck, and allay his anxieties of its being repeated, by physically reliving the event in a safely circumscribed way.

Perhaps the greatest aid to coping with the mental stress imposed by disasters was communal resilience and support. The effect of disasters was often to leave the victim desocialized by robbing him or her of the symbols of status, such as family and possessions, as well as the social spaces where the daily dramas of local life were played out. In high-mortality events, disasters could even leave large parts of the local community hierarchy dead. Losing what were fundamental features of identity in Roman society must in itself have been deeply traumatic for many. But in the face of such losses, the community sought hard to reassert its old self and its moral values. As in the earthquake at Antioch, the survivors organized collective responses, such as group processions. Members of the local elite, or even the emperor himself, would be expected to step in to provide some kind of relief aid, thereby re-establishing traditional patronage links and rebuilding confidence in the moral right of those in authority to be so. Disasters could in this way actually become a source of ongoing social cohesion and solidarity for groups that suffered them.

Religious ideas dominated explanations of both mental disorder and disaster. Disasters, for the most part, were seen as acts of gods. Propitiatory attempts to placate the gods were therefore common and widely believed to be effective. We have seen that Christians saw disasters more as an inbuilt, if mysterious, part of the divine plan for the universe. The advent of a calamitous event represented a God-given opportunity for the individual and the community to which he or she belonged to repent of their sins and reform before the coming of Judgement Day made it too late. That such powerfully moralistic views of disasters were problematic was implicitly recognized by widespread explanations which attributed them to demons. Demons made excellent explanatory agents for both disasters and mental disorder because of what Brown calls their ‘anomalous’ nature.²¹ Demons were held responsible for all kinds of confusion in human social relations and so it made sense to attribute to them any kind of disorder or chaos. It is important to emphasize that demons were a complex phenomenon that cannot simply be approached from a comparative mental health standpoint; the role of demons in Roman

society had social, political and, not least, theological aspects. But a society which placed great emphasis on the correct order of things found all kinds of disorder, including mental, deeply problematic and found it easy and natural to associate it with the demonic. For it was the disordering effects of disasters that seems to have generated the greatest distress in Roman society.



The family of Obellius Firmus, who died in Pompeii after the eruption of Vesuvius. The adult couple are holding hands and the two children have their arms entwined.

Archive of the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge

Disasters reflected religious discord and disorder. Disasters stress-tested social norms of belief and behaviour in a way that left many deeply perturbed. Disasters brought out into the open the conflicts which, at a background level, always threatened to destabilize Roman society. John of Ephesus, in his account of the flood that afflicted Edessa in 525 ce, explains the disaster as a punishment for the wicked behaviour of the orthodox bishop of the city, Asclepius. The bishop had tortured ten monks who shared John's Monophysite faith in order to make them submit to his Chalcedonian communion, and when they did not comply he imprisoned them, threatening to resume the torture on the next day. The same night, John writes, 'the flood occurred in such a way that it seemed to everyone that God had grown angry at the bishop and at the city on account of the torment of these blessed ones'. Consequently, after the city had emerged from the water, 'all those who survived took stones and rushed to the bishopric house in order to stone Asclepius. But he managed to hide from them and flee to Antioch.' The terrible stresses which such religious schism could generate could even be metaphorically represented by a disaster.

When the town of Pompeiopolis suffered a great earthquake, a 'terrible sign' took place in it: 'the ground suddenly opened and split from one side of the city to the other'. Half of the town and half of its inhabitants fell in and 'calls for help from all of them came up for several days, bitterly and horribly, to the survivors'. But 'while the latter were tormented by their bellowing coming up . . . they were unable to help them at all'.²² This is what schism did to a town. Like a terrible, chthonic force it left the town riven from top to bottom, split between those who were saved and those who were plunged into suffering and death in the depths beneath.

The disorder of disaster presented an opportunity for competition among rival social groups. Disasters smashed holes in the iron curtain of the social hierarchy, giving people a small opportunity to escape from the stifling constraints of their social ties. For disasters were never only about death and destruction. They were also about recovery and regeneration. In the same way that a disaster, by damaging the social system, could create chances for members of the elite to establish and reaffirm patronage relationships between themselves and their suffering people, so too did it provide the church with a compelling opportunity to display Christian leadership and thereby add momentum to the drive towards a deeper Christianization of Roman society. Disasters generated the material to forge communal memories, in which Christian ideas of charity and salvation coalesced into a practical, concrete reality. It was a way of converting people's sense of post-disaster disorientation and anxiety into a clearly focused form. By stressing the decadence and immorality of the populace, Christian disaster accounts could hope to promote aggressively a purer world-view, a world where higher standards of public behaviour would be driven forward by the example of moral Christian leadership.

In the same way that the disorder thrown up by disasters could be socially useful, so too could mental disorders play a beneficial role at times of social stress. The association of demonic interference with the occurrence of disasters allowed Roman society both to accept and to channel the disruptive influences unleashed by calamity. To focus simply on the negative mental health implications of disasters would be to overlook the very positive functions such disorder could perform in a rigid society. The chaotic environments which disasters could so easily create gave a rare glimpse of alternative social orderings, however discomforting they might have been. It was, perhaps, the holy man who best embodied this imaginative release. Here was a man who through his own personal struggles was immune to the dangers of disasters. Here was a man who, through his proximity to

God, had control over and expertise in the forces of nature and their effects on man. Here was a man who could drive away locusts and summon down the rains. A symbolic equivalence was established between the ascetic and the common man, which urged the common individual to direct his personal stress through the ascetic towards the greater glory of God. When it was revealed to Daniel the Stylite that God's wrath was about to fall upon the city of Constantinople in the autumn of 465 ce, he alerted the relevant authorities, both the archbishop and the emperor, 'begging them to order rites of intercession'. Unwilling to interrupt a forthcoming feast, they ignored the holy man's warnings. As a result, when the fire struck, 'all the inhabitants were in great distress and the majority had to flee from the city. They made their way to the holy man and each of them implored him to placate God's anger so that the fire should cease.' Interestingly, we are told that they would 'relate to him the personal misfortunes they had suffered'. One says, 'I have been stripped bare of great possessions'; and he describes how 'As the fire was far off I felt no uneasiness but slept with my wife and children; but suddenly the catastrophe overtook me and now I am a widower and childless, and have barely escaped being burnt alive.' Another complains that 'I ran away from that terrible danger only to suffer shipwreck of my scanty belongings.' But the holy man's response was to weep with them and to emphasize that they had only themselves to blame: 'you should have importuned God and escaped His terrible wrath'. He also spoke 'many other words of counsel' to them and thereby 'turned their hopelessness into hopefulness'.²³ In this dramatic scene, not only can we see the holy man acting as a focus for communal stress, a figure who can help survivors adjust to their new reality of loss, but we also see him turning a dreadful happening into a shining opportunity for positive regeneration and optimism for the future. It was a dramatization used to express, in the deliberately exaggerated form of a disaster context, the emotional structure of a perfect society, one in which no personal suffering could be tolerated by wider society and each individual was held in the comforting embrace of the church.

We can see all these various interrelated notions of disaster, mental disorder and the demonic at work in John of Ephesus' account of the effects of the great plague and the mental breakdown of Amida. In the wake of the plague's first descent on Constantinople, the survivors were profoundly shocked. How, asks John, could 'the heart of the witness of these things not melt inside him'? How could the eye bear up when it would see 'these heaps of infants and babies piled up in mounds like litter on the face of the earth?' But in the face of such overwhelming distress, there was 'neither crying nor mourning but

only people shocked . . . speechless like those drowsy from wine'. The plague seemed to leave their senses incapable of functioning normally. In such a state of mental disarray, people were vulnerable to all kinds of demonic deception. Demons sought to 'mislead people and ridicule their madness', so they made a survivor state that if earthenware pots were thrown from the windows of upper storeys the plague would leave the city. John records how 'foolish women . . . set their minds to this madness'. Religious normality was disrupted by similar rumours. It was said that monks brought death with them, so that 'wherever a monk or a cleric appeared, people used to howl at him and run away, thinking that he was himself the death that destroyed him'. This took place mainly among 'the simple and common people of the city', and when they saw a churchman they would push and shove each other in their desire to escape, and 'fall over each other in flight'.



Holy men like Simeon the Stylite, shown here resisting temptation on top of the column where he lived, provided miraculous cures for many local disasters.

Image courtesy of Lessing Photo Archive

In John's account, the plague acts to create a kind of negative carnival, a time when the normal rules of society were turned upside down.²⁴ The narrative emphasizes how the great disaster created a Christian dystopia, where the extremes of plague contrasted with the moderation of the good life. Everything is portrayed as the inverted image of what it should be. The dead, through their liquefaction and vivid colouring, lost their human identity. Instead of respected remains they became repugnant to the senses. They became emblematic of the profound moral decay which had in John's eyes

caused so great a disaster. The sins of the flesh were made visible to all. Plague meant a breakdown in the social and moral order that reflected the dreadful nature of the sins that had caused it. Here was, in all its gruesome detail, a shocking foretaste of the eternal punishment that awaited those who did not take note and repent.

In Amida, the plague was but the latest in a long line of disastrous events to afflict the city. As we have seen, the culmination of this perfect storm of disasters was an attack on the mind. It was natural for the sane to try to treat those suffering psychologically by means of religion. They tried to treat the victims with religious ritual. They gathered them in churches, 'using blandishments, force and threats', and the churches were filled to capacity with them. Even in such places, where they should have been on their best behaviour, they continued to look and act differently: 'some were raging and foaming, while others were raving and uttering vulgar words as if from devils in person'. They mocked and scoffed at the sane, addressing them with 'dirty and filthy words so that they might run out from embarrassment'. Convinced that foreign kings were invading, many left the churches and in a state of profound confusion 'went out at once with great vehemence, moving rapidly here and there through the whole city, misbehaving, roaming and running, troubled and confused'. Once again, their actions were marked out by wanton laughter, foul language, and violent mood swings between 'crying sadly' and then 'talking furiously', while others blasphemed and emitted 'obscene and strange sounds of madness'.

Such disorder lasted for a year and longer in Amida, where it was concentrated, with only a few being affected elsewhere. Harvey rightly points out that it was significant that holy men in the region remained within the city because it was simply too dangerous to live out in the bandit country surrounding it. This meant that they too were caught up in the plight of the city and so were unable to perform their usual role as a focus for psychological concern.²⁵ John himself has no idea what caused the outbreak of what DSM-IV would probably term 'shared psychotic disorder': 'only God knows', he explains, 'for what reason and because of what sin this divine abandonment occurred . . . that vicious demons might greatly control the youth to the extent of entrapping them in committing filthy debauchery among themselves inside churches'. We can speculate that the enormous pressure of the threat of military invasion, in the aftermath of repeated disasters, generated an outbreak of mental disorder. But that would not do justice to the range of uses to which mental phenomena could be put in Roman society. Disordered, incomprehensible behaviour can also be seen as an oblique but critical reflection by the

weak on their powerlessness in society. It represented a safe way to register discontent and perhaps even express defiance. The dangers involved in outright rebellion meant that misery found its expression in a language of mental disorder. This was a language whose grammar was inversion. It allowed a suffering population, and a disaffected youth, an idiom through which they could say something about the abnormally extreme psychological stress that their social environment was exerting upon them. The Roman world was highly regimented, which had always made the expression of alternative ideas about society a dangerous business. Deploying the mind avoided the full force of official repression by the authorities. Psychiatric expression, therefore, became a vehicle for articulating a variety of societal tensions and frustrations in a safe and potentially positive way.

The quest for recovery in Amida involved a search for renewed social and religious harmony through rituals, penitence, vows and processions. The sufferers were denied food and wine, were fed with bread and salt, and guards were placed over them to stop them committing debauchery and 'executing the will of demons'. Slowly, the treatment began to work: 'one by one, little by little, they started to come to their senses. They grieved, wept, groaned and kept busy in prayer and in painful supplication at all time.' Through the medium of religion, the victims were able to be readmitted into normal life in a way that allowed them to avow publicly their renewed enthusiasm for society's ideals. Hence groups of those who had regained their senses 'went to Jerusalem and to other holy places for prayers, sorrowful, clad in black, making supplication, praying and weeping'. Social values were reasserted. Respect for God, His (naturally Monophysite) church and the community were re-established. Rituals of prayer and pilgrimage allowed the community to state publicly its renewed mental vigour and integrity. Such rituals also marked the end of the period of disorder. After disasters, normal grief rituals are often felt to be insufficient markers for events of such magnitude. We can get a sense of this from the response to John's accounts of earlier earthquakes in 551 ce at Constantinople and Nicomedia. After many people had been found alive in the ruins, either unharmed or with just minor bruising, the people, in John's view, recognized their lucky escape as a call to repentance. As a result, new rituals were instigated to commemorate these earthquakes 'in pain and tears of repentance'. Across the region, therefore, many prayers were offered on the same days that the earthquakes had occurred. 'Collectively,' as John says, 'the whole city, so to speak, comes out to this plain for prayers.'

John's disaster narrative created a social dystopia to reflect a deep desire for the ideal society which was its mirror. His account of the

many disasters, culminating in the coming of the great plague and the collective madness of Amida, used shocking stories to advertise the perfect Christian society it inverted. In the re-established community, a model for an enhanced Christian community was established, where personal devotion was expressed in a more exaggerated and intense form. This was a narrative which told its readers how to live the good life and of the perils that awaited them if they fell short of that ideal. Disasters were the great leveller, sent by God, to iron out earthly injustice and make all equal in the face of death. For all the individual suffering and bravery in the face of terrible disaster, though, it is the local Christian community – the Monophysite group who had been so persecuted by Orthodoxy – which emerges as the true hero in his account. Through its resilience in the face of great sin and the even greater disorder that this produced, and through its actions to affirm the validity of its shared religious values, the local community managed to re-establish, in a slightly less flawed form, its own imperfect earthly version of the Christian vision of a perfect world.

Roman Disasters in Context

This book has tried to show how the inhabitants of the Roman world experienced and coped with the periodic disasters which afflicted them. Roman society was, of course, not alone in having to confront such crises. Further, it has increasingly become clear that humanity has played a significant role in the creation and exacerbation of disasters. In our own world, climate change, the mass extinction of species, and other looming ecological catastrophes show that humanity's capacity for threatening itself with disaster has not diminished. Jared Diamond has analysed various failed societies in terms of their excessive demands on the environment. Mike Davis has looked at the long-lasting effects of a series of late nineteenth-century droughts and famines to show how these were magnified by the arrogance of the then ruling European colonial powers. He argues that the establishment of the global system of capitalism went hand in hand with the creation of disaster-prone regions that came to be known as the Third World. Naomi Klein has gone so far as to suggest that modern capitalism systematically exploits the opportunities that crisis and disaster offer.¹ In this concluding section I consider briefly some of the ways in which the Roman experience of disasters can be compared with those of other periods and societies. Obviously I have already used a great deal of comparative information drawn from recent research to try and approach the Roman evidence in a new light. This has been useful in thinking about how the Romans controlled the risks of their environment, how they behaved during disasters and how they reacted psychologically. Here I think about the possibilities offered by looking at Roman disasters in a broader context, by some conclusions about what the Romans' disasters can tell us about the social context in which they occurred and what was unique about the Roman approach to coping with life-threatening danger. Finally, I look at how the image of Roman disasters has provided a useful analogy to help the modern world to think about its own threats, imagined or otherwise, an analogy which has provided the context for the way many have first approached the Roman world.

Modern and Historical Comparisons

Approaching disasters from a comparative viewpoint raises a number of new issues. In the first place, was the ancient Roman world particularly prone to disasters? Some societies and periods of history seem to have been plagued with catastrophes, while others have slumbered on relatively unaffected. Did the Romans suffer more or fewer disasters than other ancient and pre-modern – or for that matter, modern – peoples? Is it possible to measure the comparative success or failure of the Roman system in coping with disaster? Is any comparison of Rome with the modern world possible? These are all good questions. However, it might be said, there is no way of answering them without comparable data – on the frequency of event, morbidity and mortality rates, and the impact on different sections of society. Regrettably, there is little or no reliable, let alone quantitative, data from the Roman world.

While we do not have any good-quality statistics for disasters from the Roman period, we do have comparative data for the frequency of disasters in different regions of the world over the last century. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) maintains a database of disasters by type for each continent for the period since 1900. Tables 3–5 give an overview of the number of disasters reported, the number of reported deaths, the number of people reported affected, and an estimate in modern prices for the US dollar-equivalent cost of the damages. The criteria for inclusion in the database as a disaster were one of the following: 10 or more reported killed, 100 or more reported affected, a call for international assistance, or the declaration of a state of emergency. Number of deaths represents only part of the direct human impact of disasters, ignoring the significant number of wounded, but is taken here as a broadly reliable indicator of loss.

Table 3 Frequency and impact of earthquakes by continent, 1900–2010

Continent	Number of events	Deaths	Deaths per event	Total affected	Damage per event (US\$)
Europe	151	275 k	1.8 k	5.4 m	408 m
Asia	586	1.56 m	2.7 k	127 m	529 m
Africa	74	21 k	285	1.7 m	163 m

Table 4 Frequency and impact of epidemics by continent, 1900–2010

Continent	Number of events	Deaths	Deaths per event	Total affected	Damage per event (US\$)
Europe	49	2.5 m	51 k	18.2 m	n/a
Asia	328	6.5 m	19.9 k	8 m	n/a
Africa	720	458 k	637	12.3 m	n/a

The Roman empire was of course a very different place from the modern world, most obviously if we compare Roman Europe with the industrialized Europe of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a fraction of the latter's population and very different levels of disaster-preparedness. Nevertheless, the modern data is not without its uses in helping us approach ancient Rome.

Earthquakes: geophysical events of a sufficient magnitude to inflict a disaster are actually quite rare in Europe, with only one or two occurring each year. Although geophysical activity can vary significantly over time, it is unlikely that this will be the case in what is a very short period in geological terms. On this basis, one might suggest that these events were comparably rare in antiquity. Variability is also high, however, which means that these figures can only be taken as a guide to the frequency of major earthquakes in antiquity. Significant earthquakes were also far more likely to occur in the southern and eastern parts of the Roman empire. It is notable that the human impact is markedly lower in modern Africa, on account of its relatively sparse population. Given that the population of the Roman empire as a whole was probably only between 60 million and 80 million, this suggests that the large casualty estimates or impressions given in ancient sources are probably much too high. Instead they reflect the shock and terror created by the event, the extensive physical damage which earthquakes could cause to the urban environment, and the strong visual impact which the many injured and maimed may have had on survivors. It is also worth noting the high level of damage which earthquakes not surprisingly cause. Given that it was the same wealthy elite in Roman society who provided both most of our written sources and the funds for rebuilding programmes, it is perhaps not surprising that they took more notice of earthquakes than of other events and overestimated their impact.

Table 5 Frequency and impact of droughts by continent, 1900–2010

Continent	Number of events	Deaths	Deaths per event	Total affected	Damage per event (US\$)
Europe	37	1.2 m	32 k	15.48 m	542 m
Asia	145	9.7 m	67 k	28 bn	194 m
Africa	267	844 k	3 k	5.4 bn	20 m

Tables 3–5 compiled by author. Data source: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), ‘EM-DAT: The International Disaster Database’, www.emdat.be.

Epidemics: epidemics are clearly, and thankfully, rare in modern Europe thanks to improvements in sanitation and healthcare, and so have little comparability with antiquity, but they have remained high in Africa and Asia over the past century or so. It is noteworthy that the overall number of deaths has often been quite low, suggesting that when such outbreaks occurred in ancient Rome, they were generally modest in scale and localized in impact. We need to be careful of thinking that every epidemic was a pandemic. The comparatively small population of the Roman empire may have provided a kind of natural immunity to many types of contagion. It is important to note, though, that there was a heavy imbalance between numbers of country and city residents, something like 8:1 or 9:1. Infectious diseases are more active where people congregate, that is to say, in an urban environment. The huge size of some Roman urban centres will have meant that the impact of epidemics on them would have been significant. Major epidemics, such as those under Marcus Aurelius and Justinian, must have penetrated the countryside as well as the cities. It is they which attract the attention of the sources, which are in any case inclined to exaggerate for ideological reasons. We need to be aware that this can skew our reading of the impact of outbreaks of disease in antiquity as a whole.

Droughts: drought has been relatively rare in Europe, but is much more frequent in Africa. Although weather patterns will have changed since antiquity it is fair to say that droughts will have been concentrated in the southern half of the Roman empire. Again, it is worth noting that the number of deaths is on average quite low. This reflects both the localized nature of many droughts and the fact that death from starvation as a result of drought-induced famine is the ultimate end of a long process of weather-related failure. There is, in other words, often time for the rains to come and for conditions to be eased, or for other forms of social relief to intervene. What is also striking is the very high number of people who are generally affected by drought. Drought, in other words, is a slow-burning disaster which causes

misery to many but kills relatively few. Again it suggests that the accounts from antiquity exaggerate the scale of the impact of drought and famine and also focus on the worst events that did take place. None of this is to belittle the terrible suffering which clearly did affect countless thousands in the Roman empire. It simply warns us to be even more alert to the rhetorical role played by many ancient disaster narratives.

The inadequacy of the data for antiquity does not mean that historical comparisons are always useless. A narrative, non-quantitative, non-statistical comparison has been shown to yield interesting results when societies that share similar environments and cultural backgrounds have developed very differently.² Such qualitative comparison of social systems is far more problematic when the societies under examination differ markedly. The variables involved are so numerous that it is impossible to be confident in the comparability of what is being juxtaposed. But an awareness of how other pre-industrial societies were handling similar issues can help us more fully understand and evaluate what the Romans were doing and thinking. It can, therefore, help highlight what were the unique features of the Roman system.

It might be interesting to put two outbreaks of bubonic plague side by side – the Black Death of the fourteenth century and the Justinianic plague which struck the Roman empire in 541 CE. The Black Death wreaked enormous damage on medieval society, killing perhaps a third of the total European population.³ This great plague had profound and lasting impacts on the structure of Europe, being associated with falling rents and grain prices, owing to the fall in population, rising wages, on account of the smaller labour force, and changes in the system of landholding, resulting from a major shift in the balance of power between agricultural labourers and their landlords. Per capita incomes also rose and unemployment fell, all of which combined to make the lot of the average worker who was lucky enough to survive the plague considerably better. Loss of revenue from a diminished tax base left governments fiscally and militarily weak and often resulted in the imposition of a far more efficient and ruthless system of raising revenues. All of these developments left the old social order in a state of upheaval, much to the anxiety of the traditional ruling class.

It would be tempting to see the plague which began under Justinian as having had a comparably dramatic impact, and even to assign it a leading role in the transition from the late antique Roman world of the sixth century to the early Byzantine state of the seventh and

eighth. There are apparent similarities. In the Roman case, there is some evidence for rising labour costs, manpower shortages and changes in land tenure. Sarris has persuasively argued that problems with the quality of coinage in the period after the plague suggest fiscal problems resulting from a decline in the population.⁴ Lower government revenues and a shortage of military recruits, it might be argued, would have reduced the effectiveness of the army and left the empire dangerously exposed to the Muslim invasions of the seventh century, which drastically reduced the territories of the empire. This argument can be taken only so far. There is a lack of basic, hard information. The rhetorical purposes of the surviving accounts make the evidence that can be extracted, for example on mortality rates, problematic. But in addition, certain assumptions that are sometimes made are questionable: for instance, that substantial depopulation will always result in falling prices, rising wages, and changes in the landholding system.⁵ Such impacts seem to have depended on whether landholders maintained a united front against the increased demands from a reduced labour pool. The ability to generate change was a function not of the communal power of the peasantry but of the strength of the structure of the landholding system. For example, during the Black Death, Egypt's more centralized system of landownership permitted a less flexible response to a scarcity of labour. The limited supply of land in Egypt also kept landowners in a strong position. The result was that, as owners refused to give in to higher wage demands, employment fell and grain production fell, leading to higher prices, reduced real wages, sharply lower per capita incomes and no change in the landholding system.

What is truly comparable between these two great plagues is the contemporary understanding of those who lived through them: that the plague had been sent by God as a chastisement for their sins. None of this was to exclude the search for alternative explanations, in terms of medical causes or human agency, but at root it was thought to be divine displeasure that was its cause.

The comparison with another pre-industrial disaster, the Black Death, must be used carefully when it comes to understanding what impacts a pandemic would have had on the Roman world. On the one hand, the difficulties and changes which the plague caused in medieval Europe highlight the kind of issues to which we should be alert in antiquity. But direct comparison is problematic. This stems partly from the lack of reliable evidence from the Roman period, but also from the fact that the late antique world was already undergoing a series of seismic shifts in its structuring that meant the plague may not have had the impact we might expect in a more open society. The

plague may only have helped accelerate transformations that were already under way. The centralization of authority and concentration of both secular and spiritual authority in the hands of a smaller elite were processes which had been under way for generations. What historical comparisons highlight, therefore, is that the context in which a disaster occurs is key to determining its impact.

Characteristics of Roman Disasters

Putting on one side the Justinianic plague – which, in the history of the Roman empire, can be seen as a special case – we can suggest more broad conclusions about the way disasters were experienced and confronted in the Roman context. First, the Roman system was highly resilient to the external shocks generated by disasters of all forms. In the face of destructive wars and, occasionally, crushing defeats, conflagrations and outbreaks of epidemic disease, there is little evidence of panic among the ruling elite. Governments and administrative institutions survived, while society remained largely coherent and functioning. This is testament to the considerable practicality and flexibility of the Roman political and cultural system. It may even suggest that part of the reason for Rome's long-term success was that, in a world where disasters were the expected norm, the promise of stability and continuity held out significant attractions for the population as a whole.

Yet we must also remember that for most inhabitants of the Roman empire, living under its rule was not a question of choice. It was Rome's ability to inflict catastrophe on foreign peoples that not only explained the existence of their empire but was almost the *raison d'être* of the government itself. Most government expenditure went on the army with the express aim of maintaining or expanding the influence of this militarized social structure. The Roman regime cared little for most of its inhabitants' welfare. This lack of concern was itself both reflected in, and the result of, the steeply stratified social order, which saw millions condemned to slavery or poverty and many provincial cultures exploited or oppressed. The large cities that Roman stability was able to sustain reflect the two sides of Roman success. On the one hand, they represented the pinnacles of Roman civilization, with their great public buildings and grand entertainments. On the other, the deficiencies of a pre-industrial society left millions exposed to structural risks in the form of poor housing, outbreaks of disease, flooding, fire and interruptions in the food supply.

Rome's social system can be seen as having contributed significantly

to this vulnerability to disaster. Widespread disasters, such as famines, reflected government neglect and individual venality among the elite as much as harvest failures. Those in authority did not understand the economic impact that disasters could have. They did not appreciate the size of the problem and lacked the resources to respond even if they had. Instead, they saw public disasters as a trivial distraction from more serious matters. They had little abiding interest in the plight of the poor and hungry. That is not to say that the political leadership, and the social elite, did nothing to meet their needs in emergencies, but rather that the degree to which they took remedial action was limited and reflected an ideological choice based on a hierarchical view of the social world. The view that people were not always worth helping was probably at least as lethal as any flood or crop failure. Given that the people were ultimately dependent on the emperor and the political and social elite for the delivery of disaster relief, the consequence was that there was significant variability in the level of disaster response and an unevenness in its distribution – with those subjects better placed who had forged links with their social superiors and formed some kind of reciprocal relationship which might be useful in time of crisis.

Risk was built in to the Roman social system. Partly this was environmental in that the variability in the Mediterranean climate meant that harvests varied greatly. Occasional shortages were usual. But Roman society also put its weakest members in chronically dangerous situations, with inadequate safety-nets to support them in crisis. Periodic disaster was the inevitable consequence of this feature, as was general suffering. By seeing these calamities as simply an expression of divine anger, those at the top of society were able to absolve themselves of any blame. Blaming the gods also helped reinforce social norms at a time when the impact of disaster might have placed them under some pressure, thereby helping to reduce any troubling sense of vulnerability. These things just happened because it was the will of the gods. It was not until the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that such belief in disaster as an expression of divine agency was to falter. The normality of what to us would appear the most shocking events meant that the Roman elite were able largely to ignore them. The fact that people did not on the whole blame those in authority for their plight probably also reflects their own belief in the inevitability of disasters. They expected the worst to happen from time to time. A culture of risk therefore existed. People had to survive in a world where exposure to danger was normal and difficult decisions were often required. They had limited expectations of their government, although when these modest hopes were not met it often provoked a

strong popular reaction against the members of the elite who were seen as failing in their duty of care towards the populace. People worried about disasters and tried also to win over the gods to help them ward off disasters.

Rhetoric is another feature of Roman disasters. Contemporary accounts were coloured by a combination of a lack of hard evidence, political and social bias, and religious beliefs. These accounts were often written to serve other purposes, meaning that we have to be keenly alert to the underlying ideological aims of the text. Disasters generated widespread rumours and misinformation. In part, I have argued this reflected people's attempts to compensate for their inability to access reliable information to help them make the necessary decisions for survival. But it did also stem from the fear-induced imaginary extrapolations of an hysterical few. We saw how Pliny described the way that during the eruption of Vesuvius, several panicky individuals 'made their own and other people's calamities seem ludicrous in comparison with their frightful predictions'.⁶ The difficulties which people faced were not usually the primary concern of Roman historians. History was something that should focus on far weightier matters than the wretched fate of a group of poor victims. The details of their suffering were 'not important enough for history'.⁷

What concerned Roman writers most was morality, which disasters revealed in abundance. Their accounts are often peppered with tales carefully selected to deliver an appropriate moral message for their readership. We saw in Agathias' account of an earthquake in Constantinople that he describes how of the persons of rank and of the senators, only one died, a man called Anatolius. He was asleep when the earthquake struck. His bedchamber happened to be adorned with a variety of marble plaques on the wall and one of these fell on his head and smashed his skull. These plaques were, Agathias explains, 'of the kind that are lavishly and ostentatiously displayed by those who are inordinately fond of such superfluous and unnecessary bric-a-brac'.⁸ This was the fate that awaited the vain and luxuriant. Whether the story was actually true or not is an irrelevance. It appealed to the Roman moral sense: that luxury brought decadence brought destruction.

The resilience of the Roman social and belief system meant that disasters were not opportunities for the introduction of radical reforms or the trigger for rapid change. Continuity and hardiness were the norm. Such change as did occur was gradual. It was the development of institutions such as the office of emperor and later the Christian church which was to prove of central importance in fostering the

development of more widespread disaster relief in Roman society. By publishing a claim to wider leadership, both the emperors and the church needed to find ways to reach out to larger sections of the populace. Charitable assistance during disasters was a high-profile and dramatic statement of such an intent. The ability of the struggling individual to survive the horrors of a disaster through the aid of the church became a metaphor for the individual soul's battle for salvation. It was a way for Christian writers to exploit the power of crisis imagery to press the claims of a burgeoning church.

Images of Roman Disaster

Images of Roman disasters have continued to play an important imaginative role in the modern world. Disasters such as Pompeii and Rome's most significant military disasters have helped shape our representation of the Roman world, often with the purpose of warning a modern audience about the disasters that await it if it fails to heed the lessons of the ancient example. Such texts can be thought of as 'catastrophizing' the past: seeing the Roman empire as epitomized by a set of particularly revealing dramatic events, whose intensity provides a powerful example for later generations to draw upon.

This is not a new phenomenon. Focusing on the disasters of Rome received a powerful impetus from the rediscovery of Pompeii's ruins in the seventeenth century.⁹ After a visit to the excavations in 1828, the Russian painter Karl Briullov painted a monumental depiction of the disaster, a detail of which is used on the front cover of this book. The British painter John Martin specialized in cataclysmic and apocalyptic images, images which dwelt on the horrors of divine punishment. In his work *The destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, of 1821 or soon after, a vivid Vesuvius is shown firing out ash and lava over the powerless and diminutive figures who scurry round the painting's foreground, desperately trying to protect themselves from the rain of pumice stone by raising their arms, their cloaks and their shields. Trapped by a rough sea before them and the glowering volcano behind, these are humans whose everyday life has been blown apart by a terrifying new reality. They are on the verge of being engulfed by irresistible forces of nature, a metaphor for the romantic notion of the individual confronted by the power of his or her overwhelming emotions. The discovery of victims of the Pompeian disaster both allowed and encouraged a focus on them as individuals. Their fate showed how, despite all the progress of science which had taken place by the nineteenth century, people could still fall suddenly

to nature's forces. For the Christian Martin, of course, such a fate was also a metaphor for the fate that awaited the sinner on Judgement Day, when tossed into the flames of hell.

The parallel between the disastrous end of Pompeii and the potential fate of Britain fascinated many nineteenth-century artists and writers. Edward Bulwer-Lytton enjoyed enormous success with his 1834 fictional work *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which drew on many of the recent finds from the excavations at Pompeii for its inspiration.¹⁰ He had also seen Briullov's epic painting when it was exhibited in Rome. Part of the novel's success resulted from the fact that its publication coincided with a large new eruption of Vesuvius.¹¹ But such topicality cannot explain its thirty-four editions over the next century. A politician and briefly a cabinet minister, Bulwer-Lytton used his novels for didactic purposes. Above all, he saw them as vehicles for moral and political instruction.¹² Fearing a general debasement of values, he asserted that liberty and morality went hand in hand. It was this sense of moral purpose which, in his view, differentiated the British empire from its Roman predecessor and, indeed, made it better. Yet it was also clear to him that the rapid social changes which global power and industrialization had wrought in Britain were themselves a threat to this moral order which had accounted for Britain's success to begin with.

We find these hopes and anxieties throughout *The Last Days of Pompeii*. In the preface to the work, he explains that the problem with antiquity is that we have no 'familiar associations' with it. 'The creed of that departed religion,' he continues, 'the customs of that past civilization, present little that is sacred or attractive to our northern imaginations.' In fact, he argues that 'they are rendered yet more trite to us by the scholastic pedantries which first acquainted us with their natures, and are linked with the recollection of studies which were imposed and not cultivated as a delight'. His story will breathe new life into these dull old texts. He will examine the 'romance' of the period: 'the passions, the crimes, the misfortunes, and reverses that might have chanced to the shades we thus summon to life'. The fate of Pompeii had supplied him with 'so superb and awful a catastrophe'. But what makes the first-century Roman empire so fascinating to him is that this was when 'Rome was at its proudest and most gigantic eminence of unbridled luxury and unrivalled power'. His work will draw an implicit parallel between 'the hollow but majestic civilization of Rome' and the more moral, Christian empire of the British. It is not simply a novel about the 'commonplace routine of the classic luxury'.

The opening section makes it clear that we are in a world of

decadence. Two gentlemen of Pompeii meet:

‘Ho, Diomed, well met! Do you sup with Glaucus to-night?’ said a young man of small stature, who wore his tunic in the loose and effeminate folds which proved him to be a gentleman and a coxcomb.

‘Alas, no! dear Clodius; he has not invited me,’ replied Diomed, a man of portly frame and of middle age. ‘By Pollux, a scurvy trick! for they say his suppers are the best in Pompeii.’

‘Pretty well – though there is never enough wine for me.’

Here we have a world where men dress and preen themselves like women, before indulging in monumental luxury and excess. For Pompeii, in Bulwer-Lytton’s eyes, was ‘the miniature of that age. Within the narrow compass of its walls was contained, as it were, a specimen of every gift which luxury offered to power.’¹³ This was comparable to the new luxuries which empire was bringing to the British. And in the same way that the fate of these two Pompeian gentlemen was to be consumed by fire and ash, so Britain’s power would wane if they forgot the higher Christian morality which was its defining feature. That is, indeed, how the main character of the novel himself tells us that he managed to survive Vesuvius. At the end of the book, he confesses that he has joined the ‘growing sect of the Christians in Rome’, and that in his preservation from the earthquake he has learned ‘to behold the hand of the unknown God’.¹⁴

The Roman past can show the fragility of civilization, however indomitable British power might appear. The fate of Pompeii can act as a warning in an age of rapid development; its ancient destruction and later rediscovery, which brought it back to life so vividly in the Victorian imagination, providing a powerful story of sin, punishment and redemption.¹⁵

A far less serious use of the disaster at Pompeii was made in the British comedy *Up Pompeii!* Audiences for the 1971 film version were promised ‘an orgy of laughter’, to be delivered by characters such as Lurcio, a smutty slave played by that master of double entendre Frankie Howerd, his master, senator Ludicrus Sextus, his promiscuous wife Ammonia, and Cassandra the doom-mongering soothsayer. The plots were farcical. In the film, Lurcio unwittingly acquires a scroll listing a group of conspirators against the emperor Nero (notwithstanding the fact that Titus was in power when Pompeii erupted). The conspirators make ridiculous efforts to regain the scroll but it all comes to nought when Pompeii is destroyed by the eruption

of Vesuvius. In the first episode of the television series, Ludicrus must choose Miss Vestal Virgin bc 72, but the brothel owner, Noxious, wants to discredit him because Ludicrus often speaks publicly against such places of ill-repute.

As Cull has observed, *Up Pompeii!* can be interpreted as a story about three different empires:¹⁶ the British empire and its loss; the Roman empire as a place where repressed British sexuality could run riot; and the new American imperium over the world. Characters such as the lazy, lecherous and hypocritical Ludicrus mock the old-fashioned, conservative British politicians of the time. In the debunking of the classics of ancient literature which underpinned the British class system, that system itself was also ridiculed. It was a space to joke about British decline. It was also a place to warn, albeit tongue in cheek, what might happen to the west if the new 'swinging sixties' morality did not change. In the pilot programme, Howerd's prologue is interrupted by Cassandra: 'Hear my words, oh wicked citizens of Pompeii . . . Oh! I see a great fall. Your proud city will vanish in the sands of time!' Lurcio turns to camera and says: 'Shocking things go on here. You wouldn't believe it! Licentiousness! Libertinage! Orgies!' Then, looking round cautiously, he adds, 'Even bingo, oh yes!' Ominous rumblings from Vesuvius seem to underline the suggested parallel between Britain and Pompeii. Yet this is also not a parallel. The reference to such a traditional, safe pastime as bingo emphasizes just how ridiculous a notion it was that the British would start to behave like the Romans – a pyjama-clad orgy to be followed by a nice cup of tea perhaps. It also expressed something of a hope for the future: that people would be less constrained than in the past. The misery and dreadful fate of slaves is a repeated motif within the scripts. The emphasis on camp to generate new kinds of cultural identity, other than those that would previously have been acceptable on British media, emphasized that traditional British notions of morality were breaking down. It was in that sense a celebration of the cultural renewal which the 1960s brought about, with the eruption of Vesuvius serving to emphasize just how out of date was such a notion of divine chastisement for supposed sins of immorality.

But the use of such monitory interpretations of the fall of Rome has not abated. Homer-Dixon describes how 'for over a millennium in Western culture, Rome's collapse has been an emblem of social catastrophe, one often used as a cudgel in political debate. When people don't approve of a particular social, political, or economic trend, they'll often assert that it caused Rome's decline.'¹⁷ The US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan generated a flurry of such comparisons between the military disasters of the Roman empire and

the difficulties facing modern western forces.¹⁸ The protracted fighting brought to mind Rome's endless confrontations with the barbarians. The challenge to American supremacy from the east recalled the eventual fall of the Roman empire. The dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Joseph Nye, was of the view that 'It is true that no nation since Rome has loomed so large above the others, but even Rome eventually collapsed.'¹⁹ The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were compared to crushing defeats suffered by the Romans, first by Augustus' legions in the forests of Germany, an event which it was suggested marked a turning point in Rome's fortunes and the end of its efforts at imperial expansion, and second at the battle of Adrianople in 378 ce, after which the Goths were for the first time allowed to settle within the empire on their own terms. In his 2007 online article '*Quo vadimus?*', D. Weigel explained: 'Our confidence leads us to make the same kinds of military blunders as the Romans, and the only argument is whether Iraq is our Teutoburg forest or our Adrianople – if we've learned our lesson and will stop pushing outside our boundaries, or if we've used up all our get-out-of-jail cards and are primed for a fall.'²⁰ Murphy suggested that Varus' disastrous defeat was of even greater significance: 'The impact is hard to overstate. Imagine a combination of 9/11, Pearl Harbour, and Little Bighorn.' But as with America and the terrorist attacks, 'It was all the worse for coming at a moment saturated with feelings of omnipotence', just like the moment before a triumph.²¹ The great military disasters of Rome, therefore, became a means for America to understand its problems in the world arena; the ancient disasters a foretaste of what might await if it did not change tack.

This concluding chapter has looked at a variety of ways in which comparison can provide the context for approaching the Roman world. Direct comparison between Roman disasters and those of other societies can suggest the type and frequency of disasters that might broadly be expected to have afflicted Rome. Looking at the main elements of the social reaction to the Black Death highlighted the risks involved in simple comparison. It also showed how resilient were Roman political institutions for most of its history. Throughout this work I have argued that vulnerability was an inbuilt part of the Roman social system, so that most of the population were exposed to risk in a routine manner. This in part reflected the fact that those in authority were not particularly interested in the fate of their subjects. Life was too hard for disaster relief to take on any systemic form. Religious explanations dominated the understanding of why disasters happened and gave rise to a moral interpretation of many events. That people were often seen as deserving their fate further reduced any

compulsion to help them. These moralizing views of catastrophe have meant that the surviving record of Roman disasters is mostly riddled with ideological bias. But studying Roman disasters is not just about trying to recreate the thoughts and actions of the past. This final section has also shown how such comparisons have been useful for later societies to help them articulate contemporary social and political anxieties. Roman disasters have continued to provide an important resource for later artists and writers to understand their own world and the developments that are taking place in it. These comparisons can tell us little about the reality of catastrophe in the ancient world. But they underline how the shock-waves from disastrous events which struck the Romans two thousand years ago continue to resonate in the world today.

Notes

Abbreviations of ancient authors and books are based upon those of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edn).

Chapter 1 What is a Disaster?

1 The story takes place in late antique Constantinople in Agathias, *Hist.* 5.7. All translations for this source are from that of Frendo, J. D., *Agathias: the Histories*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975. Elsewhere, in the interests of accessibility, I have based all translations on those of the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise stated.

2 On Roman building techniques, see Cuomo, S., *Technology and Culture in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

3 For example Rodríguez, H., Quarantelli, E. L., and Dynes, R. R. (eds), *Handbook of Disaster Research*, New York: Springer, 2007, p. xx, although this is a mistranslation of the second character.

4 IFRC, *World Disasters Report 2001*, p. 176, available at www.ifrc.org.

5 Shah, B. V., 'Is the environment becoming more hazardous? A global survey 1947–1980', *Disasters*, 7 (1983), 202–9.

6 Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., and Davis, I., *At Risk: natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters*, Routledge, 2004, p. 3, using data from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED). CRED has an excellent online database at www.emdat.be containing essential core data on the occurrence and effects of over 18,000 disasters in the world from 1900 to the present.

7 On triumphs, see Beard, M., *The Roman Triumph*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007.

8 It is worth noting that, as Little points out, not all plagues are bubonic; they can be outbreaks of smallpox, typhus or measles. I shall use 'plague' as a general term to cover all these widespread afflictions. See Little, L. K. (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity: the pandemic of 541–750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 3–4.

9 On particular types of disaster, see, for example, Garnsey, P., *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: responses to risk and crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; Aldrete, G. S., *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007; and Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*.

10 Thuc. 1.23.

11 Tac. *Hist.* 1.2.

12 Herodian, 1.1.4.

13 Suet. *Calig.* 31.

14 See Keitel, E., 'The art of losing: Tacitus and the disaster narrative', in Kraus, C. S., Marincola, J., and Pelling, C. (eds), *Ancient Historiography and its Contexts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 331–52, at pp. 331–2.

15 Revelation 6.1–8. On Revelation, see Rowland, C., *Revelation*, Epworth Press, 1993.

16 See Garnsey, P., 'Famine in history', in Bourriau, J. (ed.), *Understanding Catastrophe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 145–78; and for the calculation concerning frequency, see Stathakopoulos, D. C., *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: a systematic survey of subsistence crises and epidemics*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

17 *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon* 9, 145, 56, in Baynes, N. H., and Dawes, E., *Three Byzantine Saints: contemporary biographies*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1948.

18 Horden, P., and Purcell, N., *The Corrupting Sea: a study of Mediterranean history*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 309–11.

19 See Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber*.

20 See Allison, P. M., 'Recurring tremors: the continuing impact of the ad 79 eruption of Mt Vesuvius', in Torrence, R., and Grattan, J. (eds), *Natural Disasters and Cultural Change*, Routledge, 2002, pp. 107–25.

21 See also Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber*, p. 6.

22 Prince, S. H., *Catastrophe and Social Change: based upon a sociological study of the Halifax disaster*, New York, 1920.

23 For an introduction to the problems of defining disasters, see Quarantelli, E. L. (ed.), *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the question*, Routledge, 1998.

24 Kreps, G. A. (ed.), *Social Structure and Disaster*, Associated University Press, 1989, p. 32.

25 See Fritz, C. E., 'Disaster', in Merton, R. K., and Nisbet, R. (eds), *Contemporary Social Problems*, New York: Harcourt, 1961, pp. 651–94.

26 Its two other criteria for entry into its database are a declaration of a state of emergency and a call for international assistance, which are clearly irrelevant to the ancient world.

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Chapter 2 Rome’s Disasters

1 Suet. *Aug.* 23.

2 Tac. *Ann.* 15.40.

3 Ibid. 4.62. Tacitus gives the casualties as 50,000 dead or maimed, Suetonius (*Tib.* 40) as over 20,000 dead.

4 On deforestation, see Meiggs, R., *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, pp. 371–403.

5 Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 5.441–5; *Cod. Theod.* 13.5.10.

6 Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.9, quoted in Meiggs, *Trees and Timber*, p. 373.

7 Plin. *HN* 33.70–78; Strabo, 4.6.7.

8 Amm. Marc. 22.15.24.

9 Claud. *Cons. Hon. Cons. Stil.* 3.317–32, 343–69; *Anth. Lyr. Graec.* 7.626; Strabo, 2.5.33.

10 Tert. *De anim.* 30.3.

Chapter 3 The Disaster Experience

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7 Paus. 7.24.9–10.

8 Agathias, *Hist.* 5.3.9.

9 John of Ephesus, 542–3. John’s account survives as part of *The Chronicle of Zuqnān*. All translations are from *The Chronicle of Zuqnān, parts III and IV: AD 488–775*, trans. Harrak, A., Toronto, Ont.: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999.

10 Strabo, 12.8.18.

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17 Sen. *Q Nat.* 6.1.6.

18 Agathias, *Hist.* 2.16.6.

19 See *ibid.* 2.15 for an account of an earthquake that hit Constantinople and many parts of the empire.

20 Diod. Sic. 19.45.1.

21 Tac. *Ann.* 2.47.

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24 Procop. *Wars* 2.23.13.

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26 August. *Serm.* 397 'On the sack of the city of Rome', ch. 7.

27 Plin. *Ep.* 6.20.

28 Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.

29 *Ibid.* 4.63.

30 Agathias, *Hist.* 5.4.1.

31 Dio Cass. 62.16–18.

32 Plin. *Ep.* 6.20.

- 33 Procop. *Wars* 2.23.20.
- 34 Agathias, *Hist.* 5.3.7–8.
- 35 *IGRom.* 4.914.
- 36 Herodian, 7.12.6–7.
- 37 Zos. 6.11.
- 38 Artemidorus, 1.70.
- 39 See, for example, John of Ephesus' fourth account of the great plague of 543–4 and of the flood that hit Edessa in 525.
- 40 Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 9.8.11.
- 41 Procop. *Wars* 2.23.3, 12.
- 42 See, for example, John of Ephesus on the earthquake in Rhodes in 503–4 and his fourth account of the great plague in Constantinople.
- 43 Procop. *Wars* 2.23.18.
- 44 Herodian, 1.14.3; cf. 7.12.6–7.
- 45 *Etna* 59–62.
- 46 Herodian, 7.12.6–7.
- 47 Zos. 6.11.
- 48 Plut. *Crass.* 2.4.
- 49 SHA *M. Ant.* 13.
- 50 Plin. *Ep.* 6.20.
- 51 Philostr. *V A* 6.38.
- 52 *Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua* 35.
- 53 John of Ephesus, 525–6.
- 54 Agathias, *Hist.* 5.3.

55 John of Ephesus, 550–1.

56 Plin. *Ep.* 6.20.

57 Thuc. 2.53.

58 Sen. *Q Nat.* 6.1.4.

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3 Plin. *Ep.* 6.16.

4 On famines, see Garnsey, P., ‘Famine in Rome’, in Garnsey, P., and Whittaker, C. R. (eds), *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1983, pp. 56–65; MacMullen, R., *Enemies of the Roman Order: treason, unrest, and alienation in the empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966, appendix A, ‘Famines’, pp. 249–54; Brunt, P. A., *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 703–6, on famines and with further bibliography. See also Dirks, R., ‘Social responses during severe food shortages and famine’, *Current Anthropology*, 21 (1980), 21–44.

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9 See Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply*, p. 63.

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- 11 Ibid. 14.57.
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- 16 Ibid. p. 229.
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- 20 Suet. *Tib.* 40.
- 21 Ibid. 48.
- 22 Dio Cass. 57.16.2; Tac. *Ann.* 4.64; Suet. *Tib.* 48; Vell. Pat. 2.130.2; Tac. *Ann.* 6.45; Dio Cass. 58.26.5; Suet. *Calig.* 16; Dio Cass. 59.9.4.
- 23 Gai. *Inst.* 1.33.
- 24 Dio Cass. 54.23.7–8.
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- 26 Procop. *Wars* 2.23.5–6.
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57 *Ibid.* 36.

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7 *Etna* 7.

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27 Procop. *Anecdota* 18.36–7.

28 Philostr. *V A* 6.38.

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30 Dio Cass. 77.2.1.

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34 Ibid. 55.8.

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36 Thuc. 2.53.

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Chapter 6 A Culture of Risk

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Chapter 7 Narratives of Disaster

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Chapter 8 Inflicting Catastrophe

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2 Flor. 1.22.13.

3 Plin. *HN* 2.200.

4 Frontin. *Str.* 1.12.3.

5 *Etna* 42.

6 App. *Hann.* 4.23.

7 Amm. Marc. 31.12–14.

8 Livy, 22.7.6–11.

9 App. *Hann.* 4.27.

10 SHA *M. Ant.* 21.

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14 App. *Hann.* 4.27.

15 Caes. *B Gall.* 7.14.26.

16 Heliodorus, *Aethiopian Story* 9.11.

17 Livy, 1.29.

18 Caes. *B Gall.* 7.14.1.

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38 Casts 407–14.

39 For example, cast 110.

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Chapter 9 The Psychological Impact

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